



NEWS RELEASE

Nebraska *National Forest*

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Forest experiencing extreme make-over

As television audiences are now inundated with “extreme makeover” reality programming, visitors to the Nebraska National Forest, Bessey Ranger District, may notice some forest management activities, that could qualify. The forest itself, wildlife, and visitors will all see benefits.

“The nation’s largest hand- planted forest has gradually reached a condition where it really needed attention, and the funding provided by the Healthy Forests Initiative and Healthy Forests Restoration Act is allowing that to happen,” said Forest Service spokesman, Jerry Schumacher.

Over one thousand acres were burned under controlled conditions earlier this month to reduce encroaching cedar trees in areas where forest managers want to maintain open grasslands. Another 460 acres containing piles of thinning debris from last year, called “slash,” were also burned. And most recently, contractors have begun a year-long contract to mechanically thin another 963 acres.

“It’s important to remember that the forest was started as an experiment to produce timber products to prevent a national wood shortage. Management activities like these were assumed from the very beginning,” said Schumacher.

In the early days, forest managers regularly thinned the forest to prevent overcrowding and promote tree growth. As it became apparent that a timber shortage wasn’t imminent, the need for the trees as a timber reserve became less important, funding to maintain them waned, and the planted tree stands became overgrown.

“We want to restore many of the historic fuel breaks that now have trees growing in them so we can more effectively stop a potentially catastrophic fire,” said Bessey District Fire Management Officer, Michael Croxen. “The State 4-H camp, the nearby towns of Halsey and Thedford, and the buildings at the Bessey Nursery and Ranger

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District qualify the area as “wildland-urban interface” which is emphasized for protection under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

Another concern to Croxen is the number of dead and dying trees.

“We have seen a gradual increase in number of dead jack pines over the last several years, now we’re also seeing more dead ponderosa pines. We’re not sure what the exact cause may be, but it’s likely that several factors, including drought and competition from overcrowding result in stresses that encourage damaging insects and disease to move in,” said Croxen.

Thinning will reduce the competition, which may allow the remaining trees to gain the nutrients they need to repel insect invasions.

Deer and turkeys, along with other wildlife species, and domestic cattle will also benefit from the burning and thinning projects.

“Since the trees are so dense, very little sunlight or moisture reaches the forest floor, so grasses and other low-growing plants that are important for wildlife are almost non-existent in many of the tree stands we are going to thin. There will be more suitable habitat for a number of wildlife species, as well as more grass production for both wildlife and permitted cattle,” added Croxen.

Schumacher makes the comparison between the country’s largest hand-planted forest, and other important national landmarks.

“I don’t know of a larger, more compelling monument to the American ‘can-do’ spirit, than the 20,000 acres of hand-planted forest,” said Schumacher. “We have seen in recent years that several other historic monuments, such as the Statue of Liberty and Washington Monument, have undergone maintenance and renovation work. It’s not very attractive while it’s going on, and it’s not a one-time job, but is necessary to protect the investment and values for current and future generations.”

Visitors traveling in the areas where burning or thinning crews are working should drive carefully, since large equipment may be moving and many of the roads are narrow, with very little sight distance.

For information about salvaging wood from the thinning projects contact District Ranger Patti Barney at (308) 533-2257.

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Bessey Ranger District fire management officer, Michael Croxen, near a stand of dying and dead jack pine.



Dense juniper stand.



Thinned (left) vs. un-thinned juniper stand. Note: USFS photos

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