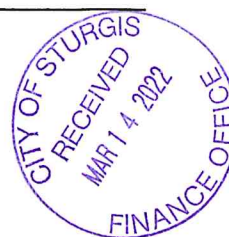




File Code: 1950

Date: March 10, 2022



Greetings from the Black Hills National Forest:

The Forest Service has initiated planning to help protect communities, watersheds, and natural resources from severe wildfire by implementing vegetation treatments to reduce hazardous fuels, thin dense pine stands, create a mosaic of forest conditions, and promote the expansion of hardwood stands and meadows in the Chimera project area, located south of Sturgis, SD and east of Deadwood, SD. This planning effort falls under the authority and guidelines of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) of 2003. This letter is intended to inform you of the proposed action and to solicit your comments on the proposal.

The Area - The project area lies immediately south/southwest of Sturgis, SD and approximately two miles east of Deadwood, SD (see vicinity map). Boulder Canyon, Vanocker Canyon, and the community of Galena are located within the project area. The Chimera project area covers a total of 54,482 acres, which includes approximately 15,950 acres of private land and 38,532 acres of National Forest System (NFS) land.

The Process - Decisions on how to manage your National Forest follow a public process referred to as the NEPA process. NEPA is the National Environmental Policy Act, which requires federal agencies to disclose the effects of our proposed actions and to include public participation in our decisions. The Black Hills National Forest Plan provides the overall direction on how we manage the Forest. We also have many other laws and regulations to follow; however, we do have some flexibility on the actions we will take, precisely where they will happen, and when they will be implemented.

The Chimera project's primary focus is to reduce the threat of fire to communities within and adjacent to the project area while increasing the resilience of the forest ecosystem. Processes provided under the authorities of HFRA can be used to expedite vegetation treatments such as mechanical thinning, hand thinning, and prescribed fire in the project area. The entirety of the Chimera project area is located within the wildland-urban interface (WUI), as defined by HFRA.

Our proposal considers what we see on the ground and how we intend to meet the direction contained in the Forest Plan and associated laws and regulations. This letter represents the beginning of the public scoping process. Through the scoping process, we can inform the public and other interested parties of what we have observed and the actions we believe will best sustain a healthy forest. The scoping process allows you the opportunity to inform the Forest Service on whether you agree with the proposed project or if you believe that a different solution or other issues exist that we should consider.

What We Have Observed – Fire is a natural disturbance that, historically, occurred relatively frequently and at low severity in the Black Hills. These frequent, low-intensity fires served to





remove fuels from the forest floor and naturally thinned pine stands while promoting the growth of the remaining larger trees along with new grasses and forbs. They also prevented pine from encroaching into nearby meadow and hardwood areas, which are naturally resistant to fire and provide important habitat diversity for plants and animals. Since the early 1900s, fire suppression efforts have largely removed fire as a natural disturbance. This has resulted in dense pine stands that are more susceptible to large, high-intensity fires and has allowed the encroachment of pine into meadow and hardwood stands, reducing their resiliency to fire. Larger, higher intensity fires have the potential to completely consume large areas of forest and present a threat to homes and communities. Large wildfires have become increasingly common across the western United States in recent years and have had a significant impact on the environment, economy, cultural and natural resources, and human life and property of the communities affected.

The Forest Service has actively managed timber production in the Black Hills National Forest since the Case 1 timber sale, the first ever timber sale on NFS land, in 1899. Management of the forest to meet the needs of local communities while protecting the myriad of natural resources existing within the forest is an ongoing process. Current conditions in the Chimera project area suggest that the area is at high risk of a high-intensity wildfire and that natural features of the forest that are more resilient to such fires, such as open pine stands and abundant hardwood stands, are lacking. In addition, human habitation, development of private land, and recreational use of the Black Hills National Forest is increasing.

Purpose and Need for Action – The purpose of the Chimera project is to increase the resiliency of forest landscapes and communities to wildfire, decrease the impacts of wildfires within the wildland urban interface, and allow for an effective and safe response to wildfires when they occur by implementing vegetation treatments that would reduce ladder fuels, thin dense pine stands, and promote the expansion of hardwood stands and meadows while working toward management area objectives within the project area.

The Chimera project is necessary because:

- The project area includes approximately 15,950 acres of private property, much of which includes inhabited structures. Development of private inholdings within the project area is increasing.
- The entirety of the project area is identified as wildland urban interface as defined by HFRA. In addition, the entire project area has been identified as a “high-risk fireshed” in the Forest Service’s 2022 Wildfire Crisis Implementation Plan.
- Approximately 27,110 acres, or 67%, of forest stands in the project area are at risk for high intensity and high severity wildfires.
- The project area is located immediately east of the communities of Lead and Deadwood and immediately south and west of the Interstate 90 corridor, including the communities of Whitewood, Sturgis, and Tilford. In addition, the communities of Galena and Boulder Park are located within the project area. All these communities are identified as “communities at risk” to wildfire and listed as such in the Federal Register.
- Hardwood stands and meadows provide several benefits, including habitat diversity for flora and fauna and natural buffers where fire intensity and severity decrease. Currently, hardwoods and meadows are being encroached by ponderosa pine, which lessens their





resilience to high intensity fire and decreases the availability of important plant and wildlife habitat.

- Of the 38,500 acres of National Forest System (NFS) land in the project area, approximately 33,800 acres (88%) are in Management Areas 5.1 (Forest Production Emphasis) and 5.4 (Big Game Winter Range). The Forest Plan calls for a range of silvicultural treatments within these management areas to create a mosaic of forest conditions that benefit wildlife habitat and promote forest resiliency.

What We Are Proposing – A range of vegetation treatments and associated actions are proposed to address the concerns identified in the purpose and need. Actions we are proposing in the Chimera project area include the following:

- Commercial thinning of up to 13,265 acres to reduce pine stand density and reduce the fire hazard rating of stands within the WUI. Thinning operations would be carried out through a variety of methods including but not limited to ground-based logging, cable logging, and helicopter logging, depending on terrain and accessibility of treatment units.
- Liberation cuts on up to 4,060 acres to meet management area objectives, create a mosaic of forest conditions, and to move those stands toward their desired future condition.
- Commercial and non-commercial thinning of pine on up to 1,480 acres of hardwood stands and 250 acres of meadows to limit pine encroachment, provide habitat diversity, and enhance natural fuel breaks. Treatment type would be dependent on stand-by-stand conditions.
- Non-commercial thinning of pine on up to 26,640 acres to reduce fuel levels. Treatment methods could include but are not limited to lopping, chipping, crushing, piling and burning, and creating fuel breaks along roads and adjacent to private property.
- Prescribed fire on up to 12,000 acres of pine stands to reduce fuel loading and continuity and to increase the quantity and quality of forage for big game and other wildlife. Prescribed burns would be conducted when weather and site-specific stand conditions allow.
- New road construction of up to 32 miles would be required to carry out all proposed commercial timber harvest treatments. Any new roads constructed under this project would be closed following use and would not become part of the Forest road system. Road construction mileage is an estimate based on GIS analysis; final locations and distance will be determined through field recon and disclosed in the environmental assessment. Non-commercial treatments would be implemented utilizing the existing road system.
- Closure of up to 17 miles of existing NFS roads or motorized trails would occur in several locations to limit resource damage, reduce open road density in big game winter range, and address safety concerns. Roads that would be considered for closure include: 168.2B, 169.1D, 170.5B, 170.5C, 170.5G, 171.1B, 172.1, 180.1E, 180.1I, 538.1A, 541.1D, 542.1A, and 8041.

Your Role – National Forests are your lands. We need your help in identifying opportunities, concerns, and issues related to these proposed activities. You can become involved by obtaining more detailed information on our proposal such as more detailed maps by visiting the Black Hills National Forest website at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61689>

To give us your opinion or to request more information, you can submit a comment at the project website listed above by clicking on “Comment/Object on Project” on the right side of the page, or





United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Black Hills National Forest
Northern Hills Ranger District

2014 N Main Street
Spearfish SD 57783
605-642-4622

you can send an email to **comments-rocky-mountain-black-hills-northern-hills@fs.fed.us** or write to us at: Chimera Project, Northern Hills Ranger District, 2014 N. Main St., Spearfish, SD 57783. While we welcome comments on this proposal at any time, they would be most helpful if received within 30 days of the date of this letter. Please respond through one of the formats listed above if you wish to remain on the mailing list for the Chimera project.

You can also get more involved by attending the public open house for the Chimera project. Forest Service officials will be on hand to discuss the project and answer questions. No formal presentation will be given, so you may arrive at any time within the scheduled timeframe:

Tuesday, March 29, 2022
5:00 PM – 7:00 PM
Sturgis Community Center
1401 Lazelle St.
Sturgis, SD

Next Steps – The next step is to further develop and refine the proposed action based on your scoping comments and other information collected. We will conduct an analysis and prepare a draft environmental assessment (EA), which will be available late summer 2022. The EA will disclose the potential impacts of the proposed action and alternatives to the proposed action, should any be identified through the scoping process. Following a 30-day comment period on the draft EA, we will consider all comments and the analysis presented in the draft EA before determining whether to issue a draft decision notice and finding of no significant impact (DN/FONSI). If a draft DN is prepared, a 30-day objection period will follow, and any objections will be considered before a final decision is issued.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact Steve Kozel, District Ranger, or Chris Stores, Natural Resources Planner, at the Northern Hills Ranger District office in Spearfish, SD, at (605) 642-4622.

Sincerely,



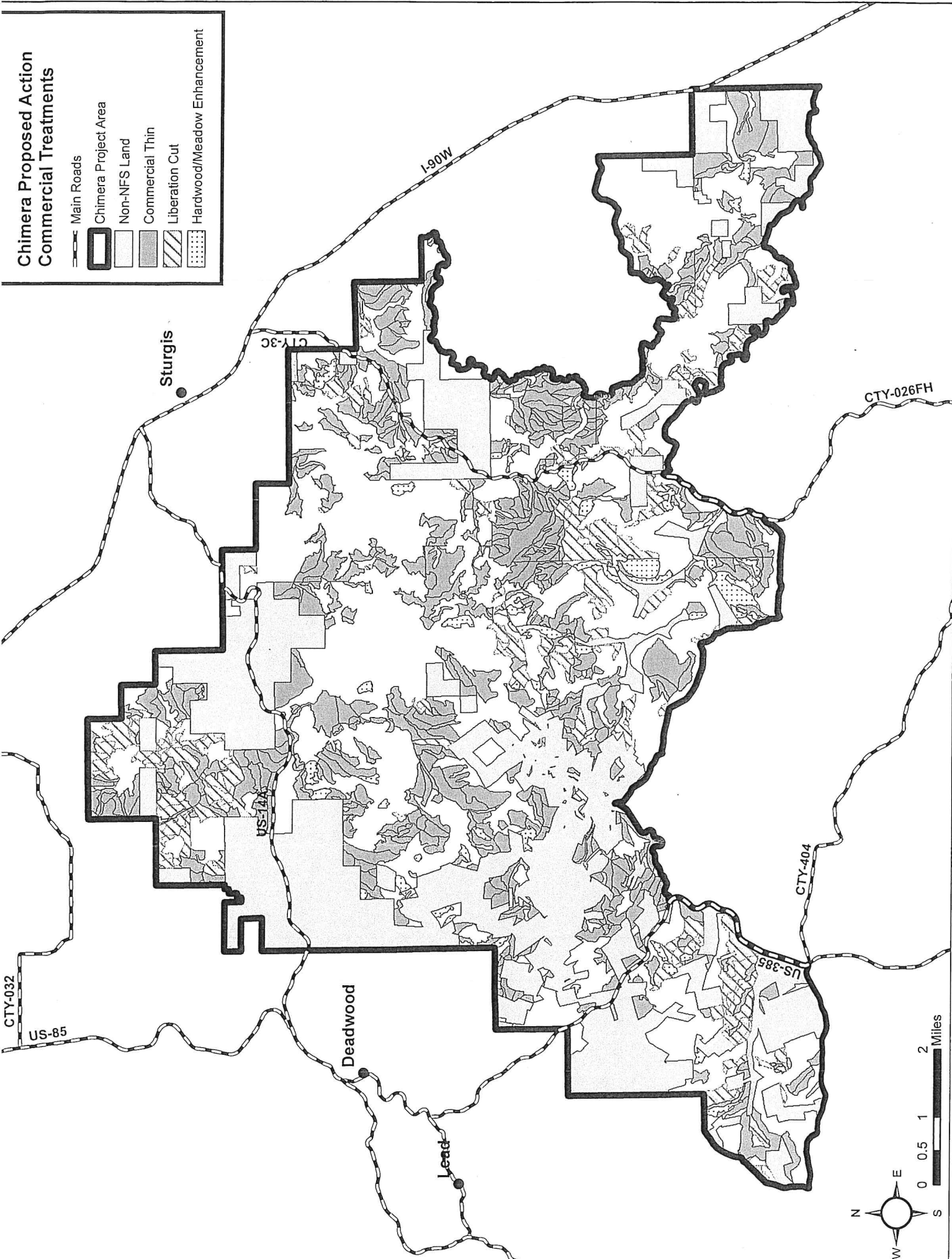
STEVE KOZEL
District Ranger

Enclosures: Chimera Project Area Vicinity Map, Chimera Project Area Proposed Commercial Treatment Map, Chimera Project Area Proposed Non-Commercial Treatment Map



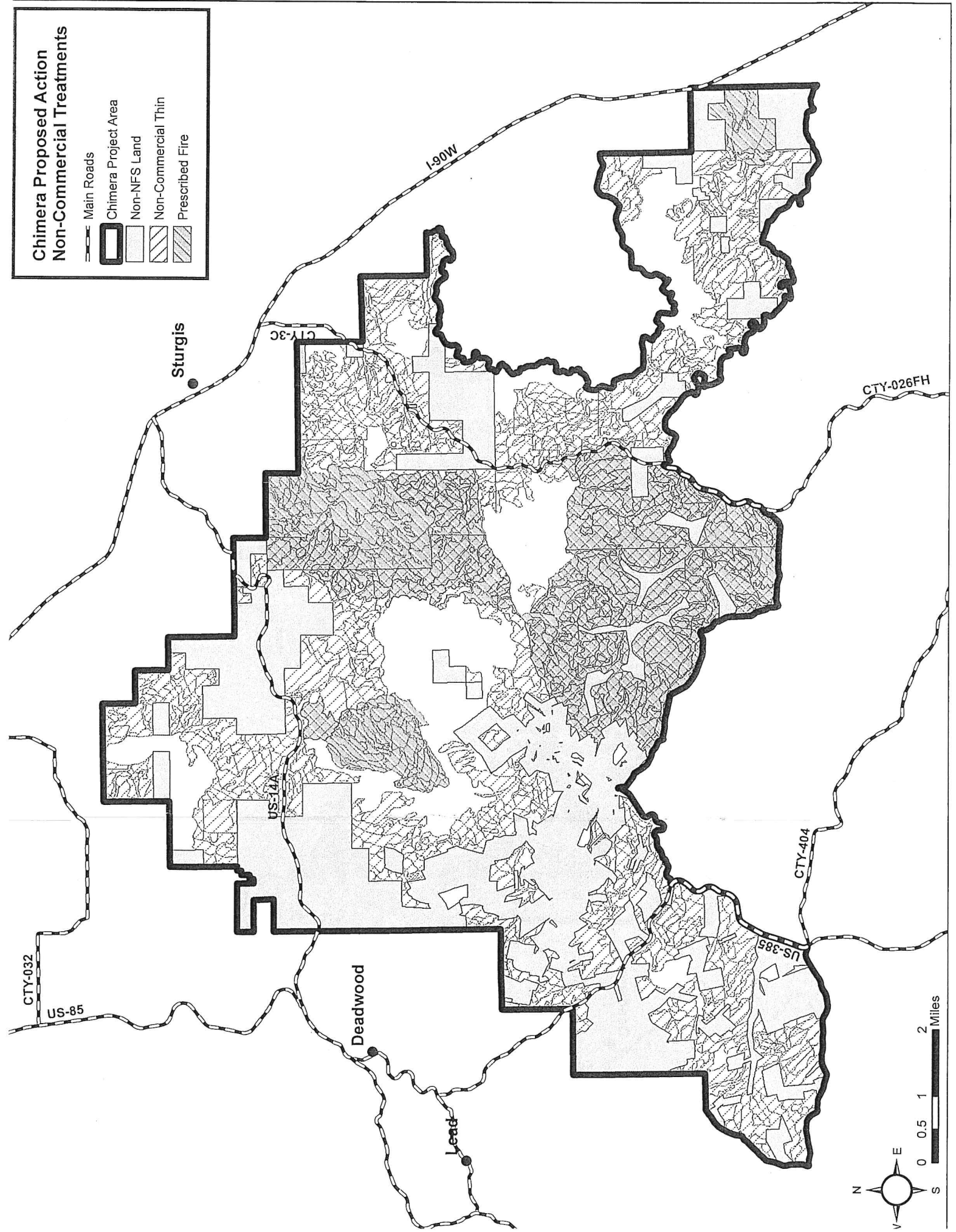
Chimera Proposed Action Commercial Treatments

- Main Roads
- Chimera Project Area
- Non-NFS Land
- Commercial Thin
- Liberation Cut
- Hardwood/Meadow Enhancement



Chimera Proposed Action
Non-Commercial Treatments

- Main Roads
- Chimera Project Area
- Non-NFS Land
- Non-Commercial Thin
- Prescribed Fire



Chimera Project Vicinity

- Cities
- Highways
-  Chimera Project Area
-  County Boundaries
-  Forest Boundary

BUTTE

MEADE

LAWRENCE

PENNINGTON

CUSTER

FALL RIVER

OGLALA LAKOTA

Spearfish

Sturgis

Sundance

Lead

Rapid City

Hill City

Keystone

Newcastle

Custer

Pringle

Hot Springs

Edgemont



0 5 10 20 Miles

