

# National Fire Plan

## Wildfire Threat Forces Quick Action: CEQ Grants Expedited Environmental Analysis To Reduce Hazardous Fuels Missouri 2002



Mark Twain National Forest will spend the next three months cleaning up tornado damage to Poplar Bluff and Potosi Ranger Districts. Tornado damage and clean-up from the April 24, 2002 storm is estimated to cost more than \$4 million dollars.



The Forest will conduct the clean-up without having to fulfill lengthy public notice comment periods under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) July 12, 2002 granted the forest alternative arrangements to be able to quickly complete the on the ground fuels clean-up.

This is the sixth time since CEQ was established in 1978 that CEQ has granted USDA Forest Service alternative arrangements.

The downed trees and debris have created a fuels build up on approximately 4,500 acres that potentially threatens 450 homes within and adjacent to the tornado path. The goal is to have the downed timber removed before the fall fire season starts early October 2002.

The April 24, 2002 tornados included one that moved diagonally across Poplar Bluff Ranger District, entering at the town on Ellsinore and leaving at about Oak Tower, north of Poplar Bluff, for a distance of about 11 miles. The tornado cut a swath about the width of 4 football fields, enlarging as it approached the area around Pine Cone Estates. "We've identified more than 800 structures near or impacted by these tornados," said Henry Hickerson, Poplar Bluff District ranger. "Those include homes, businesses and other buildings, not counting the more than 10 million board feet of timber currently lying on the ground."

The second tornado on the Potosi Ranger District near Fredericktown cut a swath approximately 14 miles long and up to ½ mile wide, impacting approximately 1,500 national forest acres.

Normally, the Forest Service follows NEPA provisions before any on the ground clean-up can be completed. NEPA process requires, among other things, that the agency develop clean-up plans that are publicly reviewed, commented on and then decided. CEQ has provisions to authorize alternative arrangements to the lengthy NEPA process in certain emergencies. "Because of the health and safety of our neighbors, we asked CEQ for alternative arrangements so we can quickly start the clean-up," Hickerson said.

The tornado clean-up will be the forest's main priority over the next three months. The emphasis will include refocusing all employee efforts across the forest. "This is not going to be an easy process," said Potosi District Ranger Katie Stuart. "It's going to take all of us to get this accomplished. It's to everyone's benefit if we can quickly get the hazard removed."

While this is a project to treat on the ground fuels funded through the National Fire Plan, Acting Mark Twain National Forest Supervisor Mike Sanders said the clean up will also be funded through timber and salvage dollars. "Timber sales are being used as one of the tools to mitigate the on the ground fuels that are hazardous," Sanders said. "We successfully fought several western fires because similar forest fuel built up had been significantly reduced. We are learning from those fires. We need to clean up this debris to not only be able to get access into the area so we can fight fires, but to protect nearby home owners as well." Sanders said it was lucky no one was hurt during the April tornados. "As urban areas expand, people are living closer to forests and can be significantly impacted by a natural disaster such as this one," he said.

Mark Twain National Forest is located in 1.5 million acres scattered across 29 counties in southern and central Missouri. Approximately half the land within the forest boundaries is privately-owned. The forest has been managed since 1935 to continue to restore Missouri's ecosystems and maintain healthy, working forests.