

# United States Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management

## Billings Field Office

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### Decision Record

**Environmental Assessment DOI-BLM-MT-0010-2011-0025-EA**

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#### **DECISION:**

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has analyzed 960 acres and is proposing to treat units within the analysis area, totaling 335 acres, using mechanical methods followed by prescribed fire. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposes a combination of vegetation treatments and related projects to reduce the risk of high-severity wildfire, salvage dead and dying timber, increase the health and vigor of residual stands, and improve wildlife habitat.

It is my decision to approve the proposed action (Alternative 2) including all stipulations and project design features to treat up to 335 acres using mechanical methods followed by prescribed fire, as described in the environmental assessment for the Green Mountain Forest Health Restoration Project. Specifically, this decision authorizes the following:

- Hand and mechanical forest treatments to remove insect and disease damaged trees and reduce stocking levels and fuel loadings on approximately 335 acres throughout a 960 acre parcel of BLM;
- Construction of approximately 7,000 feet of temporary roads for the purpose of conducting forest health activities. Temporary roads would be obliterated/reclaimed and stabilized upon completion of projects;
- Construct approximately 1,700 feet of new permanent road and obliterate/reclaim and stabilize approximately 1,880 feet of existing road;
- Remove conifer encroachment adjacent to existing Aspen stands perimeter;
- Reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire by creating strategic fuel breaks and/or changes in plant communities adjacent to private lands;
- Utilize prescribed fire (pile burning, jackpot, broadcast) to improve forest health conditions including:
  - a. Disposal of logging debris;
  - b. Stand density reduction and hazardous fuels reduction;
  - c. Improved big game habitat;
- Rejuvenation of Aspen stands

The authority for my decision is contained in:

- The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976 established policy and guidelines for the administration, management, protection, development, and enhancement of public lands (43 U.S.C 1701 et seq.: 90 Stat. 2743; P.L.94-579);
- The Code of Federal Regulations, 43 CFR, Chapter 5000 (Forest Management).



**Compliance and Monitoring:** All contracts authorizing vegetative treatments will be administered by the Authorized Officer or his/her Representative. Contract administration will be for the purpose of assuring compliance with stipulations and mitigations listed in the Environmental Assessment and any contracts. Treatment areas will be monitored following contract completion for a period of 2-5 years. Treatment monitoring will evaluate Forest Health conditions following silvicultural treatments including (but not limited to) fuel loadings, wildlife habitat, stand diversity, insect and disease levels, soil conditions (erosion), and noxious weeds.

**Alternatives Considered:** Two alternatives were considered but eliminated from further analysis:

- **Prescribed Fire Only Alternative:** Prescribed fire under existing fuel conditions would be difficult to control, costly, and pose an unacceptable risk to human health and safety and surrounding private property.
- **Non-Conventional Logging Systems Alternative (helicopter and other specialized logging equipment):** Market research was done via phone calls, informal site tours and appraisals of timber value to determine if other means of mechanical treatments could be economically completed without road building. In all cases, non-conventional logging systems were not economically viable without a significant change in the market conditions associated with the timber industry.

The No-Action alternative was carried forward and analyzed in the Environmental Assessment.

**Rationale for Decision:** The proposed treatments will improve forest health by reducing stand densities, reducing overall fuel loadings, and improving vegetation production and diversity. Specifically, the proposed vegetative treatments are designed to salvage dead and dying timber which will help to reduce the risk of high-severity wildfire and improve overall stand conditions including wildlife habitat. The decision to allow the proposed action does not result in any undue or unnecessary environmental degradation and is in conformance with the Billings Resource Management Plan 1984, as amended by the Fire/Fuels Management Plan EA for Montana/Dakotas, approved September 2003.

All treatments and mitigations were developed through both an internal and external scoping process that included an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists and the following public process:

- Meeting with landowners from adjacent private ownerships at the McLeod School on January 20, 2008;
- Ongoing communications during 2010, 2011, and 2012 with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), Stillwater Mine, Lionhead Ranch,
- Press Release and article in Billings Gazette on Jan. 15 announcing open comment period thru Feb. 1, 2013;
- Public scoping in conjunction with the Boulder River Watershed Association quarterly meeting Jan. 24, 2013 – McLeod, Montana;
- News Article in Big Timber Pioneer on January 31, 2013;
- Press Release issued to Billings Gazette and Big Timber Pioneer announcing a 15 day comment period of the Draft Environmental Assessment.
- Draft documents for comments were available through the Billings Field Office NEPA log and posted on their external website.

Very few comments were received, and those that were received comments were supportive of the project.

**Notice of Forest Management Decisions:** In accordance with 43 CFR 5003.2 the Authorized Officer shall, when the public interest requires, specify when a decision governing or relating to forest management shall be implemented through the publication of a notice decision in a newspaper of general circulation in the area where the lands affected by the decision are located, establishing the effective date of the decision.

**Protests:** In accordance with 43 CFR, 5003.3 following publication of this Forest Management Decision protests may be filed with the Authorized Officer and must be received at the **Bureau of Land Management, Billings Field Office, 5001 Southgate Drive, Billings, MT 59101** within 15 days after the

first publication of this notice. As interpreted by BLM, the regulations do not authorize the acceptance of protests in any form other than an original written and signed hard copy that is delivered to the physical address of the advertising BLM office. Faxes or e-mails will not be considered a valid protest. The protest, if filed, should clearly and concisely state the reason(s) why the decision is in error. In the absence of a protest, the Authorized Officer may proceed with implementation of the decision.

  
Authorized Officer

4/4/13  
Date