DECISION RECORD

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA) # MT-B010-2013-0017-EA
Chamberlain-Wales Resource Management Projects

INTRODUCTION

The Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Missoula Field Office, has reviewed the EA for the proposed timber harvest, thinning, prescribed burning, helispot establishment, and temporary road construction and rehabilitation which was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The proposal and an alternative were developed and reviewed by an interdisciplinary team. The current decisions are being made based on the May 6, 2014 version of the EA.

On February 15, 2014, the BLM made a decision to implement the following subset of actions analyzed in the Proposed Action in the EA: tree planting, cone collection, road drainage improvements, road obliteration, culvert removal, stream crossing restoration, and tree thinning for snowshoe hare research. These decisions were based on the November 20, 2013 version of the EA. No protests or appeals were received associated with these decisions; therefore the BLM is moving forward with implementation of these actions.

DECISION

It is my decision to authorize the following Proposed Actions as stated in the EA. This decision is in conformance with the Record of Decision for the Garnet Resource Area Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (1986), as amended, and is contingent upon meeting all stipulations, mitigations, and project design features as listed in the EA and reproduced below. Please refer to Section 2.3 of the EA for literature citations in support of the Proposed Action.

Timber Harvest with Prescribed Fire: Lodgepole Pine Stand Replacement
(Units HF5, HF6, HF7, HF8 and HF9)

A maximum of 359 acres of single-storied conifer forest are proposed for timber harvest and prescribed fire treatment to reduce the present continuous canopy of conifers, primarily dead serotinous lodgepole pine. These treatments would create early forest successional stages (i.e. stand initiation).

Design Features specific to this treatment

In units where broadcast prescribed fire is determined to not be viable, lop and scatter, chipping or grinding, and/or pile burning may be implemented to reduce fuel loading and fire hazard from the non-commercial material left on the site.

Recommended snag densities of 5-10 snags per acre, either in groups or distributed

throughout units, leaving the largest snags available. Douglas-fir is preferred when available, but are not common in proposed treatment units, as per the Northern Region Snag Management Protocol. However, safety may be compromised when prescribed burning and snags may be felled. Leave areas between treatment units and other areas with lodgepole pine cover types currently have >50% tree mortality from pine beetles and therefore the availability of snags for wildlife is not limited.

Units HF6 and HF7 would be designed to include reserve areas of a minimum of 600 feet wide so each opening (i.e. harvest patch) within the units would be no more than 40 acres.

Unit HF9 would be designed with reserve areas within the unit to create edge effect and maintain appropriate site distances. The reserve areas would be located so each opening (i.e. harvest patch) within the unit would not be greater than 20 acres in size.

Within Units HF6, HF7 and HF9, if skid trails must utilize reserve areas, designated skid trails would be required with the Wildlife Biologist assisting in skid trail location in order to minimize impact to the reserve area.

Within Units HF5, HF6 and HF7, harvest activities including slash treatment and temporary road obliteration would be completed if possible within three summer seasons from harvest initiation in order to reduce impact to elk.

Within Units HF8 and HF9, harvest activities including slash treatment and temporary road obliteration would be completed, if possible, within two summer seasons from harvest initiation in order to reduce impact to elk.

Timber harvest would involve ground-based skidding and cable yarding (slopes greater than 40%). Any yarder, forwarder and/or skid trails would be rehabilitated following harvest (decompacted, seeded, mulched).

Timber Harvest with Prescribed Fire: Western Larch – Mixed Conifer Stand Restoration *(Units HF1, HF2, HF3 and HF4)*

Up to 314 acres would be treated through uneven age group selection timber harvest followed by prescribed fire to develop historic western larch-mixed conifer "old stand" attributes, consume logging slash and create seedbeds through disturbance to encourage natural western larch regeneration. Forest stand improvement including planting of western larch or other conifer species may be conducted if necessary in portions of the treatment area if natural regeneration amounts do not meet the desired stocking levels. Treatments would be intended to maintain and/or create multi-story stand structures to enhance habitat for snowshoe hare and Canada lynx.

Design Features specific to this treatment

Promote western larch regeneration and an uneven age, multi-storied forest structure through timber harvest by creation of 2 to 5-acre patches with the patches' short axis being a minimum of one to two times the adjacent seed wall height with retention of the best western larch or ponderosa pine, if present, in the group;

Emulate natural disturbance patterns from fire, insects, and disease by distributing group patches across the treatment area with the groups estimated to cover 20 to 30% of the treatment area following the initial treatment and by creating sinuosity and feathered tree density transitions, where possible, on the patch edges;

Retain the subalpine fir component outside of the group selection patches to maintain and enhance habitat for snowshoe hare and Canada lynx. During harvest, designated skid trails would be instituted to preserve to the extent possible, the understory subalpine fir.

Protect wildlife travel corridor integrity on ridges by locating group selection patches 300 feet or greater from each side of ridges (600 feet total reserve on ridges) and where possible, away from treatment area boundaries which are adjacent to previously harvested areas still in the seedling/small sapling stage.

Provide historic wildlife attributes such as snags and large down logs, and improve the quantity and quality of forage and browse species. To preserve/promote these attributes:

–Retain, where possible, groups of snags, favoring wind-firm species such as ponderosa pine and western larch. The recommended snag density is 4 snags per acre at least 20 inches dbh, favoring western larch and ponderosa pine where available, and Douglas-fir as a second choice, as stated in the Northern Region Snag Management Protocol.

–Retain areas with higher components of down woody debris or if limited down woody debris is present, augment the site during treatment to add down woody debris;

–Improve forage quantity and quality through low to moderate severity prescribed burning post-harvest.

Any yarder, forwarder and/or skid trails would be rehabilitated following timber harvest (decompacted, seeded, mulched).

Forest Stand and Wildlife Habitat Enhancement in Sapling/Pole-Sized Stands
(Units T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T12, T13, T14, T15, T16)

Up to 632 acres of pre-commercial thinning would occur primarily on the lower, drier habitat types. Improved forest resiliency, diversity and health would occur through

treatments by shifting tree species composition, density and arrangement to fall within the HRV (desired condition). Pre-commercial thinning would not occur in Canada lynx forage or denning habitat. All other treatment areas are considered Canada lynx 'matrix' habitat (smaller patches of drier or open habitats intermixed among larger expanses of typical lynx habitat) or are not within lynx habitat (i.e. dry ponderosa pine dominated sites).

These stands are typically regeneration harvests from the mid-1980's through the mid-1990's. The harvests are predominantly on recently acquired industrial forest land (except T1 and half of T10) and are currently overstocked, or will transition to over-stocked in the next decade.

The forest stand and wildlife habitat enhancements are categorized into three types of treatment:

- Ponderosa pine restoration (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T12, and T13): Approximately 546 acres of dense sapling/small pole stands within the ponderosa pine/Douglas-fir conifer type would be pre-commercially thinned. These stands are from regeneration harvests on recently acquired land (T13) or from conifers restocking the site following the 1991 Clearwater Game Range Fire (T1).

- Mixed conifer restoration (T14, T15, and T16): Approximately 86 acres occur within the Canada lynx 'matrix' habitat. These sites are composed of mixed conifer species on relatively drier sites located at lower elevations within the analysis area. These sites are dominated by either ponderosa pine and/or Douglas-fir.

T1through T8 and T12 through T16 are dense sapling/small pole stands that would be pre-commercially thinned with site-specific prescriptions designed to:

Design Features specific to this treatment

Proposed treatment unit T1 would be inventoried prior to thinning to determine if Howell's gumweed (*Grindellia howellii*) is present. If found, individual plants would be flagged and avoided during treatment.

Prescribed Fire with Fuel Augmentation *(Units F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6, F7, F8, F9, F10, HF12, F12 and F13)*

Prescribed fire would be implemented on up to 1,483 acres outside of the Wales Creek Wilderness Study Area. The objectives of this prescribed burning fall into four categories:

1. To restore remnant larch stands that are not currently regenerating (F2, F3, F7, and F8). Sapling to pole-sized trees would be hand slashed in sufficient

quantities to support a medium to high intensity burn to create moderate severity in the soils and the stagnant Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine layer. The burn would be intended to reduce the average stagnant Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine canopy by 50 to 75% and increase mineral soil exposure by at least 50% to create patches of bare ground needed for larch regeneration.

2. To restore lower elevation ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir savannah types that are being encroached by conifers (F1, F4, F5, and F12). Sapling to pole-sized trees would be hand slashed to augment the fuels in sufficient quantities to support a low intensity burn, resulting in low severity in the overstory and soils. This fuel augmentation would help during the prescribed burning phase of the project to target the seeding, sapling, and small pole sized trees that are encroaching, while providing protection for the medium to large size trees and desired seedlings and saplings. The burn would be intended to reduce the encroaching conifers by 50 to 75%, while keeping mortality in the medium to large tress at less than 10%. Another objective would be to not reduce duff depth by more than 25 to 50% across the unit.

3. To create patches in the lodgepole pine stands that have high levels of mountain pine beetle mortality (F6 and F13).

4. To create patches in the stagnant single-storied lodgepole pine stands (F9, F10, and HF12) to create understory shrub, graminoid, and forb diversity for wildlife habitat enhancement. Some of the stands proposed for burning in Frazier Creek do not have beetle mortality, but are stagnant small diameter lodgepole pine stands with no understory.

For categories 3 and 4 above, sapling to pole-sized trees would be hand slashed in sufficient quantities to support a high intensity burn resulting in moderate to high severity in the overstory and low severity in the soils. The burn would be intended to reduce the average overstory canopy by 50 to 75% and increase mineral soil exposure by at least 50%. Larger stems may be felled or girdled as necessary after the burn to meet course down woody debris and snag requirements.

A portion of HF12 (approximately 85 acres in T14N R13W Sec. 25) is currently on land owned by The Nature Conservancy (TNC). The BLM is in the process of acquiring this land from TNC. The action proposed assumes a completed land acquisition on this parcel. Implementation on this portion of the proposed action would only occur if the acquisition is completed or if TNC would want to continue as a partner with the BLM during implementation.

In HF12, post and pole harvest treatments would be used prior to prescribed burning in the lodgepole pine stands to assist in the preparation/fuel augmentation of the burn units. Any post and pole operations would be conducted from the currently existing roads. No new roads, including temporary would be constructed. The total acres for post and pole harvests would not exceed 40 acres.

Control lines may be used on all or portions of the unit boundaries. These control lines may be roads, trails, rock scree, or constructed firelines. Firelines may be constructed by hand or using fireline explosives. Existing roads and trails accessing these units would be maintained for use during implementation.

These treatments are designed to change the structure of wildland vegetation and biomass distribution for the purpose of altering potential fire behavior, particularly in areas of lodgepole pine with high mountain pine beetle mortality. Fuel management techniques that have proven effective in changing wildland behavior and effects include prescribed burning, and other mechanical manipulation of living and dead vegetation. Forest fuel treatments that reduce canopy fuels must often be accompanied by surface fuel treatment; otherwise surface fuel hazard can be increased.

Prescribed Fire without Fuel Augmentation: Wales Creek Wilderness Study Area *(Units WSA F1, WSA F2, WSA F3)*

Prescribed burning in the Wales Creek Wilderness Study Area (WSA) would be conducted in four units totaling 2,153 acres. Prescribed fires would be ignited within these units in ignition zones located where a combination of high fuel loading, decadent herbaceous shrubs, mountain pine beetle mortality exist, or stagnant lodgepole pine stands exist. The size of the ignition zones would be between 20 and 100 acres, and could cumulatively cover up to 50% of the prescribed burn units (a total of 1,076 acres). The purpose of these burns is to restore and enhance natural disturbance processes, to create patches within the existing lodgepole pine and mixed conifer forest, to aid in future wildfire management, and to enhance wildlife habitat.

The proposed treatments would be designed to:

- Produce low to moderate intensity burns resulting in moderate severity in the overstory and low severity in the soils;
- Reduce fuel loading in ignition zones by 50 to 75%;
- Reduce lodgepole pine canopy coverage by 50 to 80% within ignition zones;
- Be ignited with aerial firing devices including a plastic sphere dispenser and/or a helitorch;
- Stimulate understory shrubs, graminoids, and forbs;
- Aid in future wildland fire management;
- Utilize existing natural features such as terrain, ridges, trails, rock scree, wet draws and/or fuel type changes for control features. Existing roads and trails accessing these units would be maintained for use during implementation;

- Reduce duff depth by 25 to 50% across the unit.

Design Features specific to this treatment

Firing and control boundaries would avoid straight edges to resemble more natural fire occurrences.

Control tactics would be the minimum amount needed to achieve desired results.

Fire control efforts would use Minimum Impact Suppression Tactics (MIST). Heavy equipment would not be used inside the WSA.

Chainsaw use would follow MIST and may be authorized in limited instances where large dead standing trees or dense concentrations of dead and down material compromise personnel safety or control of firelines.

Temporary Road Construction and Rehabilitation (HF2, HF3, HF4, HF7, HF8)

To provide access to the upland forest prescribed fire with timber harvest treatment areas a maximum of 2.5 miles of new roads would be built. All of these roads would be temporary and, where practical, mechanical harvesters and forwarders which do not require road construction would be used to reduce the proposed road mileage.

Design Features specific to this treatment

After use, temporary roads would be decompacted and outsloped. Soil, rock, slash cover and large woody debris would be replaced. Slope recontouring would be used where needed to provide slope stability. Rehabilitation would be generally completed within three years after timber harvest operations are complete.

Temporary roads would not be constructed with extended inboard drainage ditches routed to stream crossings.

Helispot Development

Two helispots would be established near the border of the Wales Creek WSA to aid in initial attack of wildfires within the WSA. These helispots would be located in previously managed areas that are already open thus would require little improvement. These helispots would have a clear and level touchdown pad measuring 20 by 20 feet, and a safety circle measuring 90 feet in diameter, suitable for a Type II helicopter. H1 occurs on lands presently owned by The Nature Conservancy, however this land is currently in the process of being acquired by the BLM. H1 would only be developed once BLM takes ownership of these lands.

Other Design Features

Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat

Vegetation treatments would incorporate guidelines provided in the "Northern Region Snag Management Protocol" and "Trees and Logs Important to Wildlife in the Interior Columbia River Basin" to maintain and/or improve snag or large woody debris. Green tree replacement snags would be present in treated and untreated forest habitat.

Vegetation treatments would not occur from June 1 to July 15 to protect big game calving and fawning, and the nesting season for Bird Species of Concern. Lodgepole pine replacement burns are an exception and may occur during the first two weeks of June to reduce risk of escaped fire.

If active nests of Bird Species of Concern are located, 40 acres around the nest would be deferred from any ground disturbing activities from April 15-August 15. The area would be evaluated to determine if treatment modification should be considered, such as excluding the 40 acre buffer zone around the nest from treatment. Nest locations would be potentially identified during pre-treatment monitoring, during pre-treatment layout, and during treatment activity monitoring by administrative staff and BLM contractors.

If active Pileated woodpecker nests are located outside the June 1-July 15 period, vegetation treatments would be deferred and a 40 acre buffer would be established to protect the nest site until young fledge from the nest. Further evaluations would occur with the potential outcome of modifying the project to further avoid or minimize impacts.

Vegetation treatment blocks would be established to minimize effects to grizzly bear, elk, and other wildlife. Blocks would be spatially and temporally arranged to reduce the areal extent and duration of disturbance. Project implementation would be completed in one block before being initiated in the next block.

Vegetation treatments would discontinue and potentially be modified in areas where an active eagle, goshawk, great gray owl, or flammulated owl nest is discovered. Treatments would be evaluated and potentially resume after the nesting season. For the goshawk, nesting may occur from March 1 to September 30.

Vegetation treatments involving timber harvest would be considered for winter operations to reduce impacts to elk and grizzly bear summer range.

Vegetation treatments would be designed to maintain wildlife travel corridors along major ridges, saddles, and riparian areas. Within the treatment unit boundaries of HF 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, and 12; F4, 6, 10, and 13; and WSAF 1, 2, and 3, prescribed burning would be conducted with firing techniques to minimize to the extent possible the reduction in cover within 300 feet of major ridges, saddles, or riparian areas. Within the treatment unit boundaries of HF 1, 2 ,3, 4, 7, 9, and 12; and T2, 3 ,4, and 8, tree harvest and thinning would be conducted via layout and location of treatment areas to minimize the reduction in cover

within 300 feet of major ridges, saddles, and riparian areas.

Maintain variability of habitat by creating sinuosity in harvest and harvest/fire treatment units by limiting the width of treatment units HF5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 to 600 feet from edge to edge to allow for appropriate juxtaposition of foraging areas.

Temporary and existing roads would be managed to maintain wildlife security.

Prescribed fires would have fire lines rehabilitated, fuel augmentation evenly distributed, and pre and post treatment of noxious weeds.

Contractors would follow the *Missoula Field Office Food/Attractant Storage Strategy for conservation of the Grizzly Bear and Other Wildlife*.

Recreation and Visuals

Vegetation treatment unit boundaries would avoid straight edges where possible in order to more resemble natural openings.

Vegetation treatment unit boundaries would avoid an abrupt edge appearance where possible by retaining scattered, full-crowned trees along the boundary.

Vegetation treatment units would retain stringers of trees where possible.

Skidding operation would be limited to dry or frozen ground to reduce soil disturbance and the likelihood of skid trails being apparent to a casual observer.

Sites where slash piles are burned would be scarified and vegetated with native grass seed to reduce the visual impact.

For actions implemented through contract or permit, no motorized vehicle use would be allowed in the Blackfoot Block Management Area beginning on the Friday before the opening day of the general big game hunting season through the end of the second weekend, during the last nine days of the season, and during the weekends.

Cultural Resources

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (P.L. 89-665; 80 Stat. 915; 16 U.S.C. 470) and its implementing regulations found at 36 CFR Part 800 requires Federal agencies to take into account the effects their actions would have on cultural resources for any endeavor that involves Federal monies, Federal permitting or certification, or Federal lands. Cultural resources are locations of past or current human activity, occupation, or use and include prehistoric or historic archaeological sites, buildings, structures, objects, districts, or other places. Cultural resources can also be natural features including native plant localities that are considered to be important to a culture, subculture, or community. Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs) are places associated with the traditional lifeways,

cultural practices or beliefs of a living community. These sites are rooted in the community's history and are important in maintaining cultural identity. Locations of TCPs, are often not known to the BLM, but may still be present in the project area.

Surface disturbing treatments have the potential to impact cultural resources and some native plant species utilized by tribes. Specific treatment proposals would follow standard procedures for identifying cultural resources, in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The process includes necessary consultations with the Montana State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and interested tribes. Consultation regarding specific treatment projects would be initiated with Tribes prior to treatment.

Invasive Plants

Contracts for vegetation treatments, road, or culvert work would stipulate that all off-road equipment would be power-washed prior to arriving on public land.

Weed detection, monitoring, and management actions would be conducted before, during and after implementation of the proposed activities.

Herbicide application would continue under, and conform to, the Vegetation Treatments Using Herbicides on Bureau of Land Management Lands in 17 Western States Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement.

The design features from the BLM Integrated Weed Management Environmental Assessment MT-100-2008-019 are incorporated here and would be applied for this proposed action.

Existing roads used to transport heavy equipment and haul forest products would be treated with herbicides to control all detectable noxious weeds prior to operations.

All temporary roads would be inspected for noxious weeds and treated prior to rehabilitation, followed by revegetation with a certified weed-free seed mixture of forbs and grasses.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC)

Proposed treatment units T12 and F15 within the Bear Creek Flats ACEC would follow ACEC guidance.

Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs)

Proposed treatment units would incorporate the Riparian Habitat Conservation Area (RHCA) management direction as specified by the BLM Interim Bull Trout Conservation Strategy and the Plan-Implementation Biological Opinion. In RHCAs, primary management emphasis would be given to the protection and maintenance of features and

processes critical to riparian and aquatic ecosystem function. These features include large standing and down wood, understory and streamside shrubs, and vegetation important for maintaining streamside soil stability and microclimate. Default RHCA boundaries would be as follows:

Category 1: Fish-bearing streams: Interim RHCAs consist of the stream and the area on either side of the stream extending from the edges of the active stream channel to the top of the inner gorge, or to the outer edges of the 100-year floodplain, or to the outer edges of riparian vegetation, or to a distance equal to the height of two site-potential trees, or 300 feet slope distance (600 feet including both sides of the stream channel), whichever is greatest.

Category 2: Permanently flowing non-fishbearing streams: Interim RHCAs consist of the stream and the area on either side of the stream extending from the edges of the active stream channel to the top of the inner gorge, or to the outer edges of the 100 year floodplain, or to the outer edges of riparian vegetation, or to a distance equal to the height of one site-potential tree, or 150 feet slope distance (300 feet including both sides of the steam channel), whichever is greatest.

Category 3: Ponds, lakes, reservoirs and wetlands greater than 1 acre: not present in the Analysis Area.

Category 4: Seasonally flowing or intermittent streams, wetlands less than 1 acre, landslides, and landslide-prone areas. This category includes features with high variability in size and site-specific characteristics. At a minimum the RHCAs must include:

a. the extent of landslides and landslide-prone areas;
b. The intermittent stream channel and the area to the top of the inner gorge;
c. The intermittent stream channel or wetland and the area to the outer edges of the riparian vegetation;
d. For Priority Watersheds (bull trout present), the area from the edges of the stream channel, wetland, landslide, or landslide-prone area to a distance equal to the height of one-half site potential tree, or 50 feet slope distance, whichever is greatest.

Site potential tree height would be verified during final treatment unit layout.

Stream channels where fish presence has not been previously determined would be surveyed prior to final treatment unit layout.

A fishery biologist would participate in treatment unit layout to ensure that RHCA objectives are met.

No tree felling, ground-based skidding, or yarding would occur in the interior portion (one site potential tree height) of RHCAs.

Limited selective cutting and removal of trees may occur within the outer portion (one site-potential tree height) of RHCAs in units HF3, HF4, HF5, and HF9 to achieve specific vegetative condition or fuel management objectives. Cutting and removal of trees would ensure that shade, microclimate, large down woody material and other important RHCA features and Riparian Management Objectives were given priority consideration.

Prescribed fire would be conducted in the outer portion of RHCAs in units F3 and F9, if necessary, to accomplish burning in adjacent uplands with the objective of simulating the low fire intensity, burned/unburned mosaic that is characteristic of the natural disturbance processes. Fire prescriptions would be developed to prevent fire from reaching intensities that would result in elimination of the duff/organic layers and exposure of mineral soils. No more than ten percent consumption of grasses and shrubs is desired adjacent to the wetted channel.

Prescribed fire would be hand-ignited adjacent to RHCAs unless doing so would compromise the safety of personnel.

Only hand-constructed fireline would be used within the RHCAs. These lines would be constructed with proper drainage structures. Upon completion of the prescribed burn, the lines within RHCAs would be fully rehabilitated (replacement of soil, duff, litter, slash).

Mixing of fuels (gasoline, diesel, and oils), fueling of equipment, and storage of fuel would not be conducted in RHCAs unless there are no other alternatives. Refueling sites within RHCAs would be designated by the fisheries biologist and have an approved spill containment plan.

Toxic materials, including spheres and torch fuel, would be transported, stored, and used to minimize accidental spillage and/or introduction into streams.

Helicopter landing sites or refueling areas would not be established in RHCAs.

Drafting of water from streams would require that the intake hose be fitted with a screen mesh equal to or smaller than 3/32 inch.

Soil and water quality protection

State of Montana Forestry Best Management Practices, and Streamside Management Zones as per the Montana Stream Protection Act, would be implemented.

Skid trail locations would avoid soils or conditions that are highly prone to compaction, displacement, or erosion, instead favoring soils with higher rock content, avoid skidding on saturated soils, favor skidding on frozen or snow-covered soils.

Air Quality

Prescribed burning operations would follow procedures and standards developed by the Montana State Airshed Group to insure adequate smoke dispersal in order to prevent deterioration in air quality. These procedures and standards are considered "Best Available Control Technology" as determined by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality which regulates open burning in Montana.

Dust abatement measures would be used as needed during periods with dry road conditions and heavier traffic use. These may be included as contractual provisions.

DECISION RATIONALE

The Proposed Action and the No Action alternatives were analyzed in the EA. The No Action alternative was not selected because under this alternative higher tree densities would result in increased wildfire intensity or large insect and disease outbreaks. In overstocked stands, stand vigor would decline. The risk of stress-induced insect and disease damage in response to increasingly higher tree densities and competition would ultimately predispose stands to higher risk of crown fire. Alteration of historic fire regimes may occur in the coming decades under all forest cover types. These effects are described in detail in Section 4.2.1 of the EA.

The Proposed Action was selected because it will accomplish the following.

For lodgepole pine stands:

- Reduce single-storied lodgepole pine average conifer canopy coverage by >75% in patches ranging from 20 to 300 acres through emulation of a moderate to high severity (to the overstory vegetation) fire in natural patterns consistent with lodgepole pine dominated subalpine fir habitat types within Fire Group 7;

- Protect wildlife travel corridor integrity by locating treatments 300 feet or more from major ridges, saddles, and riparian areas;

- Maintain variability of habitat by creating sinuosity in treatment units by limiting the width of the treatment units to 600 feet from edge to edge to allow for appropriate juxtaposition of foraging areas and hiding cover for wildlife, such as elk, black and grizzly bears;

- Use low to moderate intensity broadcast prescribed fire after mechanical treatments to consume logging slash and other on-site fuels, stimulate shrubs, forbs, and graminoids, and prepare seedbeds for future lodgepole pine stands;

- Use prescribed fires with low severity for both the overstory and the soils, to reduce hazardous fuel loadings to no more than 15 tons per acre while increasing

mineral soil exposure by 20 to 50% across treatment areas to create favorable seedbeds for lodgepole pine regeneration;

- Promote and maintain blue huckleberry, where applicable, through low intensity, low severity ground fire and increase available sunlight to huckleberry patches.

For western larch stands:

- Promote the heterogeneity typical of this forest type by maintaining diversity among other conifer species such as ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, subalpine fir and Engelmann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*) where applicable throughout size classes and structure layers within the treatment area;

- Reduce logging slash in harvest patches and improve understory shrub, graminoid and forb species diversity in non-harvested patches using low to moderate intensity prescribed fire producing a moderate severity burn in the overstory and in the soils. Prescribed fire would utilize the jackpot method to conduct any burning in the treatment patches;

- Promote western larch "old stand" attributes (see historic wildlife attributes below for additional "old stand" attributes) by retaining, where possible, trees greater than 21 inches dbh;

- Increase mineral soil exposure by at least 50% within the group selection patches to create favorable seedbeds for western larch regeneration.

For precommercial thinning treatments:

- Reduce competition and increase tree vigor by reducing average conifer overstory canopy coverage by approximately 50%, through variable spacing between 6 and 24 feet;

- Develop mixed species stands, where possible, composed of the best trees selected for growth, form, and disease and insect resistance characteristics;

- Promote seral tree species such as ponderosa pine, quaking aspen, black cottonwood and western larch, where applicable and possible;

- Maintain and restore, where possible, key wildlife habitat elements such as snags, large down logs and quantity and quality of browse and forage species (i.e. serviceberry, fescues, etc.);

- Reduce infections of diseases such as dwarf mistletoe within the conifers;

- Reduce hazardous fuels in the long term (greater than 10 years).

For prescribed fire treatments:

- Reduce fuel loading in the WSA treatment areas by 50 to 75%, and reduce lodgepole pine canopy coverage by 50 to 80%.

- Stimulate understory shrubs, graminoids, and forbs in the WSA treatment areas to promote wildlife habitat diversity;

- Aid in future wildland fire management by breaking up fuel continuity within the landscape;

- Change the structure of wildland vegetation and biomass distribution for the purpose of altering potential fire behavior, particularly in areas of lodgepole pine with high mountain pine beetle mortality;

- Aid in initial attack of wildfires within the WSA through the establishment of two helispots.

These effects to vegetation communities are described in detail in Section 4.3.1 of the EA. Associated effects on wildlife habitats and species are described in Section 4.3.2. Benefits include: increased forage for grizzly bears on 4,309 acres during the next 20-30 years; increased foraging habitat for snowshoe hares (and thereby Canada lynx); increased forage for elk, mule deer, and white-tailed deer.

Potential adverse effects to wildlife related to activity-based disturbance will be minimized through the deployment treatment blocks in which treatments will be localized spatially and temporally in four different blocks within the project area. Lack of motorized public access to the majority of the project area eliminates potential disturbance-related effects due to public use. Numerous design features (listed above and in Section 2.3 of the EA) will prevent or minimize other adverse effects to wildlife.

The BLM consulted on this project with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is in compliance with the Endangered Species Act.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

An initial Proposed Action was publicly scoped for 30 days in the spring of 2013. The Environmental Assessment and Draft unsigned FONSI were mailed to 134 recipients and a 30-day comment period was initiated on November 20, 2013. Five responses were received with comments pertinent to the projects that are the subject of this decision. The majority of comments pertained to effects on wildlife and habitat. Other comments were related to fire management, timber harvest volume and economics, temporary road obliteration, recreation, and the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. Substantive comments were addressed with BLM responses included as Appendix D in the EA.

Consultation was also conducted with the Tribal Preservation Department of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, the BLM consulted with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the effects of all activities described in the

Proposed Action of the EA. The USFWS concurred with BLM effects determinations of "may affect, not likely to adversely affect" grizzly bears, Canada lynx, and Canada lynx critical habitat in a memorandum to the Missoula Field Office dated December 20, 2013.

ADMINISTRATIVE REMEDIES

Appealable Decisions

The Decision for the prescribed burning treatment units F1 through F13, and WSAF1 through WSAF3; and helispot construction, are *appealable* decisions.

These decisions may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA), Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations contained in 43 CFR Part 4. Public notification of this decision will be considered to have occurred on May 8, 2014. Within 30 days of this decision, a notice of appeal must be filed in the office of the authorized officer at 3255 Fort Missoula Road, Missoula, Montana, 59804. If a statement of reasons for the appeal is not included with the notice, it must be filed with the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of Hearings and Appeals, U.S. Department of the Interior, 801 North Quincy St., Suite 300, Arlington, VA, 22203 within 30 days after the notice of appeal is filed with the authorized officer.

If you wish to file a petition for stay pursuant to 43 CFR Part 4.21(b), the petition for stay should accompany your notice of appeal and shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards:

(1) The relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied,
(2) The likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits,
(3) The likelihood of irreparable harm to the appellant or resources if the stay is not granted, and
(4) Whether the public interest favors granting the stay.

If a petition for stay is submitted with the notice of appeal, a copy of the notice of appeal and petition for stay must be served on each party named in the decision from which the appeal is taken, and with the IBLA at the same time it is filed with the authorized officer.

A copy of the notice of appeal, any statement of reasons and all pertinent documents must be served on each adverse party named in the decision from which the appeal is taken and on the Office of the Solicitor – Billings Field Office, Rocky Mountain Region, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2021 4th Avenue North, Suite 112, Billings, Montana 59101, not later than 15 days after filing the document with the authorized officer and/or IBLA.

The BLM will only accept hardcopy appeals received by the end date of the appeal period.

Protestable Decisions

The Decision for forest management treatments in HF-1 through HF-9, and HF-12;

precommercial thinning units T1 through T8, T12 through T16; and the associated construction and rehabilitation of temporary roads, are *protestable* decisions. The decisions to sell forest products associated with treatments units HF-1 through HF-9, and HF-12; as well as construction and rehabilitation of temporary roads; do not become protestable until the Timber Sale Notice(s) is/are published in local newspapers, at which time the decision becomes final according to BLM regulation and 43 CFR 5003.3. For the purposes of protest on precommercial thinning treatments, the effective date of this decision is May 8, 2014, and the associated deadline is close of business May 23, 2014.

As interpreted by BLM, the regulations do not authorize the acceptance of protests in any form other than a written and signed hardcopy delivered to the physical address of this office. Electronic mail or facsimile protests will not be accepted.

The EA and supporting documentation are available for review at the BLM, Missoula Field Office at 3255 Fort Missoula Road, Missoula, Montana, and on the Missoula Field Office website at [http://www.blm.gov/mt/st/en/fo/missoula_field_office.html].

MONITORING

The BLM will ensure all project design and implementation work conforms with the treatments and design features described in this Decision Record.

TIMING OF IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of this decision is contingent on funds being available. Project work will begin in the summer or fall of 2014.

John W. Thompson — May 7, 2014

John W. Thompson
Acting Field Manager
Missoula Field Office, Missoula, Montana

Date