

Rationale for Designation of Proposed Priority Landscapes for National Forests in Montana

Introduction

The Agricultural act of 2014, (i.e. the Farm Bill), Forestry Title, provides for expedited review and approval of restoration projects on national forests lands by authorizing the Secretary of Agriculture to designate treatment areas for forestlands that exhibit declining forest health. Specifically, the Bill allows for the designation of landscape-scale areas by the Secretary, if requested by the Governor of the State:

“Not later than 60 days after the date of enactment of the Agricultural Act of 2014, the Secretary shall, if requested by the Governor of the State, designate as part of an insect and disease treatment program 1 or more landscape-scale areas, such as subwatersheds (sixth-level hydrologic units, according to the System of Hydrologic Unit Codes of the United States Geological Survey), in at least 1 national forest in each State that is experiencing an insect or disease epidemic.”

An ad-hoc committee was formed by the Montana State Forester to identify priority landscapes to recommend to Governor Steve Bullock. This committee included representatives from conservation organizations, forest industry, collaborative groups, and local government, with review and input from National Forest Supervisors and Regional Office staff. Governor Bullock reviewed recommendations and forwarded his final list of areas totaling nearly 5 million acres across 7 national forests to the U.S. Forest Service on April 9, 2014.

We believe the majority of these areas meet the criteria for priority landscapes established in the Farm Bill:

- currently experiencing declining forest health;
- at risk of experiencing substantially increased tree mortality over the next 15 years due to insect or disease infestation;
- in an area in which the risk of hazard trees poses an imminent risk to public infrastructure, health, or safety.

Selection Process

DNRC and the USFS R-1 staff jointly prepared a base map with forest insect and disease information and the HFRA wildland-urban interface (WUI) layer. Wilderness and roadless areas were excluded from the initial base maps.

These maps were distributed to the ad-hoc committee, national forest supervisors, and other interested parties for their review and comment. Revisions were made to these maps based upon their input.

The revised maps were resent to those involved for further review. The final recommendations are reflective of input from the ad-hoc committee, national forest supervisors, and representatives of some of the collaborative groups engaged in national forest management.

On the Helena-Lewis and Clark, and Custer-Gallatin National Forests, some inventoried roadless area parcels within the WUI were included in the proposed priority landscapes. It is anticipated that treatments within these areas would comply with the roadless area conservation rule.

Forest by Forest Summary

The following list details those involved with identifying the proposed priority landscapes for each national forest:

- Ad-hoc committee:
 - Bob Harrington, Montana State Forester
 - Gary Burnett, SWCC and Lincoln Restoration Committee
 - Julia Altemus, Montana Wood Products Association
 - Barb Cestero, Beaverhead-Deerlodge Working Group
 - Carol Brooker, Sanders County Commissioner
 - Bruce Farling, Montana Trout Unlimited
 - Keith Olson, Montana Logging Association
 - Ex-officio:
 - Tim Baker, Governor's Office
 - John Tubbs, DNRC Director
 - Christine Dawe, USFS R-1
- Kootenai NF
 - KNF staff
 - Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition
- Flathead NF
 - FNF staff
 - Southwest Crown Collaborative
- Lolo NF
 - LNF staff
 - Trout Unlimited
 - Southwest Crown Collaborative
- Bitterroot NF
 - BRF staff
- Beaverhead-Deerlodge NF
 - BDNF staff
 - Beaverhead-Deerlodge Working Group

- Helena-Lewis & Clark NF

- HLCF staff
- Lincoln Restoration Committee

- Custer-Gallatin NF

- CGNF staff
- Greater Yellowstone Coalition

Conclusion

Montana is the 4th largest state and has seven large national forests within its borders. The 60-day timeframe was difficult to meet, and was made more challenging with the extent of forest health issues in the state.

There was significant involvement in this effort from a diverse set of interests and US Forest Service staff. We are confident that the majority of the proposed landscapes meet the criteria for designation under the 2014 Farm Bill.

We would like to extend our thanks to the USDA Forest Service Northern Region, committee members, stakeholders and DNRC staff who worked diligently to meet the deadline for submittal.

We look forward to working with USFS staff to help analyze and select the final priority landscapes for Montana. Our focus will then shift to help identify and implement the most appropriate projects to utilize Farm Bill authorities as soon as possible.