

## *Introduction to the Tenmile South Helena Project*

The recent mountain pine beetle outbreak highlighted concerns about the Tenmile watershed for agencies and members of the public. Heavy fuel accumulations and dense forests, due to decades of fire suppression and insect mortality, may increase the potential for landscape-scale fires and associated watershed and resource effects. Also of concern are water quality issues arising from chronic sediment sources.

The Tenmile Watershed Collaborative Committee (TWCC) was appointed by the Helena City Commission in 2008 to develop recommendations to address interrelated issues in the watershed. In 2009, the TWCC provided suggested goals and recommendations for management needs in the watershed. The committee concluded that the careful use of prescribed fire, including pre-fire fuels thinning

where appropriate, represents the best strategy to minimize the risk of an uncontrollable wildfire in the Tenmile watershed.

In addition, the Tri-County Community Wildfire Protection Plan which was signed into action in 2005 identified the area of the Helena South Hills, Colorado Gulch, and the Tenmile Municipal Watershed as areas of concern and high priorities for fuel hazard reduction work. Communities at risk in these areas include Helena, Montana City, Clancy, Unionville, and Rimini.

Based in part on these recommendations, the Helena National Forest (HNF) has identified a preliminary project area (see map) that encompasses the Tenmile Watershed, South Hills, and Colorado Mountain areas and is approximately 60,000 acres in size.

### **Purpose of the Tenmile-South Helena Project**

- Maintain a consistent quantity and quality of water within the municipal watershed.
- Provide improved conditions for public and firefighter safety in the event of a fire.

## *Watershed Conditions*

The Upper Tenmile watershed was designated as a Priority Watershed for restoration through the Forest Service's Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) process. This was due to a variety of factors, including its value as a municipal watershed, extensive wildland-urban interface, and numerous watershed impairments. The WCF process guided an assessment of restoration work needed to improve watershed conditions. A Watershed Restoration Action Plan (WRAP) was then developed specifically for the Upper Tenmile Creek. The plan identifies issues, goals, objectives, and monitoring and evaluation. Specific project activities include the targeted reduction of hazardous fuel loading through

*The Tenmile Municipal Watershed typically provides nearly all of Helena's water for nine months of the year, and is augmented in summer months by water from the Missouri River.*

prescribed fire, and pre-fire fuels thinning.

As previously discussed, the Tenmile Watershed Collaborative Committee developed recommendations to address issues related to the threat of wildfire in the watershed. The committee concluded that treatment at the landscape scale would reduce the likelihood of widespread severe wildfire impacts.

In addition, the Community Wildfire Protection Plan identifies and prioritizes areas for hazardous fuel reduction treatments and recommends the types and methods of treatment that would protect one or more at risk communities and essential infrastructure.

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY  
COUNCIL. 2013-14  
SJR 15 Work Group  
June 26, 2014

*Exhibit 4*

This project addresses the quantity and quality of water within the municipal watershed by reducing the probability of high-severity wildfires and their associated detrimental watershed effects .

## *Vegetation Conditions*

In recent years an outbreak of the native mountain pine beetle has caused substantial changes to the forested vegetation in the Tenmile-South Helena area. This insect attacks primarily old lodgepole pine growing at high densities, a condition which characterized much of the Tenmile watershed. Age class diversity was low due to fire suppression and the growing conditions that occurred during the last century. Due to their high susceptibility, many stands in the area sustained high levels of tree mortality. In most stands, surface fuel levels are ex-

pected to become very high as this unraveling process occurs over the next decade or so. In the short term, many of the dead trees are still standing, representing the "gray phase" of the beetle outbreak.

In addition to the predominant lodgepole forests, there are other forest conditions present, including unique habitats like whitebark pine and aspen. Species such as Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine are more dominant in the lower elevation areas near Helena.



## *Fireshed Assessment*



Areas likely to sustain and contribute to high intensity wildfire and risk, as well as areas across the broader landscape that may be acting as conduits of these risks to the Tenmile South Helena area are being identified in a Fireshed Assessment. The assessment will also evaluate the potential consequences of different types of treatments. The fireshed assessment completed for this area will be used to develop a proposed action.

A variety of fire modeling tools are used to conduct this assessment, utilizing recently updated data sources. Fire Behavior Experts from the Rocky Mountain Research Station are assisting with the modeling process.



Fire modeling outputs include; maps showing the ignition points of fires most likely to burn large proportions of the watershed; the forested stands that are most likely to carry fire; expected fire path, behavior, and size; and the location of treatments most likely to interrupt large fire growth and meet other resource objectives. The resource values and constraints used in this modeling are developed in an interdisciplinary setting. Ultimately this process will assist the Forest in identifying the location of treatments to best modify fire behavior across the landscape. These opportunity areas will be further assessed to determine their feasibility and the potential for applying management tools such as prescribed fire and tree cutting.

## Public Participation

Interested members of the public will have the opportunity to discuss the fire assessment and the development of the project throughout the planning process. Public dialogue sessions will be held to provide interested parties with more detailed information and solicit input. To become involved, please attend the upcoming Open House. At this Open House, the following will be discussed:

- ◆ the fire assessment, and
- ◆ the analysis and refinement of other potential opportunities, issues, and constraints.

All meetings will be open to the public and all will be welcome to participate.

### Open House Location

Baxendale Fire house

July 9, 2014 3:30—7:00 pm

### Who should attend?

- ◆ County & local governments
- ◆ Non-government organizations
- ◆ Local fire districts
- ◆ Timber & Ranching
- ◆ Land Managers
- ◆ Private landowners
- ◆ Recreation users
- ◆ Rural communities
- ◆ Scientists
- ◆ Public land managers
- ◆ Tribes

If you cannot attend but would like to be involved with the project, please contact Marshall Thompson at (406) 495-3795. There will be additional opportunities to provide input to the project. Stay tuned to future editions of this newsletter for more information.

Collaboration will help the Forest identify values and constraints that should be considered. If you are interested in being on the Collaborative Team, please see the City of Helena website at [www.helenamt.gov](http://www.helenamt.gov).

### Estimated Timeline

*Develop Proposed Action: mid July 2014*

*Public Scoping: early August 2014*

*Develop Alternatives: early October 2014*

## Ongoing Activities in the Tenmile Area

- ◆ Implementation of the Red Mountain Flume Chessman Reservoir Project, which includes tree cutting and prescribed fire across approximately 490 acres adjacent to the flume and reservoir, is planned to begin in the summer of 2014. For more information, please contact DNRC Andy Burgoyne at (406) 458-3517
- ◆ Mine site remediation above Rimini will begin in late July continuing into November, if weather permits. Most of the mine site waste excavation will take place in 2014 and most of the hauling of wastes to the Luttrell Repository will occur in 2015. As in past years, there will be road closures on Rimini Road above Rimini. For more information please contact Tillman McAdams at (406) 457-5015.
- ◆ Hand slashing within the Clancy Unionville project will continue throughout the summer. Crews will be thinning units within the Clancy Creek and Oxidental Plateau areas. Handline construction for future prescribed burning may occur in the Grizzly Gulch area south of the Show-Me-The-Horse-Trail. Prescribed burning will likely be put on hold until late fall or spring of 2015. For more information, please contact Bob Culbreth at (406) 495-3911.
- ◆ The city of Helena deployed MCC crews for raking, seeding, and erosion barrier work adjacent to the Red Mountain Flume. The city will also be preparing for the removal of hazard trees on four city owned properties. For more information, please contact Brad Langsather at (406) 447-8454
- ◆ Road paving work is not expected to occur in 2014 while right-of-way and permitting are being finalized. However, CenturyLink will be installing underground phone conduit. For more information please contact Eric Griffin at (406) 447-8036.

## USDA Forest Service

Helena Ranger District  
2880 Skyway Drive  
Helena, MT 59602  
Phone: 406-449-5490

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We're on the Web!

[www.fs.usda.gov/helena/](http://www.fs.usda.gov/helena/)

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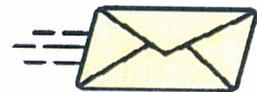
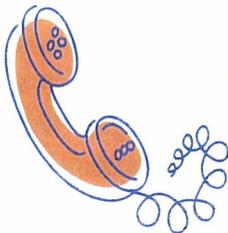
## USDA Forest Service

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If you would like to be involved with this upcoming project, please let us know, including how you would like to be kept informed— email or postal mail. To help save on printing and mailing, we encourage the use of email, but understand if you need to receive information via the postal service.

You may send your contact information to the Helena Ranger District (see address above) attn.: Marshall Thompson; call it in to (406)495-3795; or, email it to [marshallthompson@fs.fed.us](mailto:marshallthompson@fs.fed.us) (include "Tenmile-South Helena" in the subject line).

Information will always be available on the forest website.



*"Perhaps most importance attaches itself to the fact that Helena is dependent upon this area for the city's supply, and, realizing the danger of a possible shortage in the devastation by fire and other sources at the heads of Ten Mile Creek, the city council made a special plea for a reserve to protect that watershed." John H. Hatton, 1904,*  
The Proposed Helena Forest Preserve