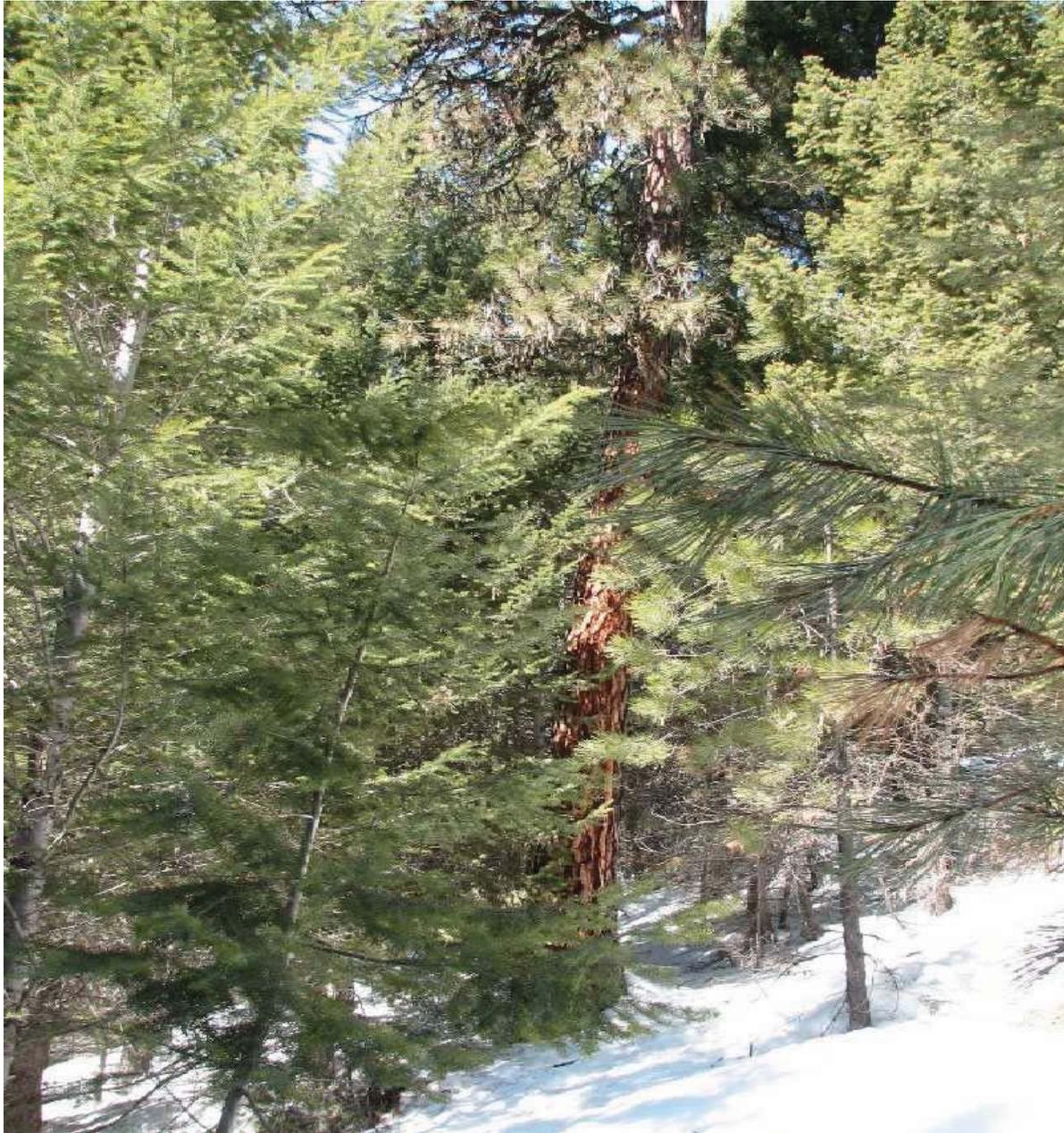


**Draft Environmental Assessment**  
***BCWMA Ovando Mountain Forest***  
***Habitat Restoration Project***

August 20, 2010



***Montana Fish,***  
***Wildlife & Parks***

# Draft Environmental Assessment MEPA, NEPA, MCA 23-1-110 CHECKLIST

## **PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION**

### **1. Type of proposed state action:**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to conduct forested habitat restoration treatments on 354 acres of the Ovando Mountain Unit of the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Treatments would remove conifers encroaching on aspen galleries, thin shade-tolerant understories of historically open and fire-adapted stands, and remove diseased dead and dying late seral lodgepole pine to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and encourage grass and woody browse recruitment on important ungulate winter range. Please see #9, below, for a detailed description of the proposed action.

### **2. Agency authority for the proposed action:**

The land subject to this proposal is included in the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area (BCWMA), Ovando Mountain Unit, which was originally purchased with Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration monies (Project W-30-L) administered by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the authority of the Pittman-Robertson Act (P-R). Matching funds for acquisition of the BCWMA were provided by FWP from revenues generated by the sale of Montana hunting licenses. FWP uses budgeted license revenues, within spending authority granted each biennium by the Montana legislature, for maintenance of the BCWMA. FWP is authorized to use supplemental funds from various public and private sources, which may be awarded under specific conditions for individual maintenance and enhancement projects on the BCWMA and other properties.

#### **BCWMA Management Plan**

FWP initially established the Ovando Mountain Unit of the BCWMA by purchasing and exchanging lands from 1957 through 2009 for the purpose of protecting wildlife habitat and carrying on wildlife restoration projects in accordance with P-R. More specifically, FWP manages this property primarily to provide important winter range for elk and deer, as outlined and described in the Application for Federal Assistance (Project W-30-L) and Management Plan for the BCWMA (on file at FWP, Region 2). The Management Plan directs FWP to manage for the maximum sustainable utilization of the winter range by elk, mule deer and white-tailed deer following these standards:

- Soil condition and development will be maintained or enhanced;
- Adverse impacts to adjacent landowners will be reduced or mitigated;
- The condition of elk and deer populations will be maintained or enhanced;
- Elk and deer populations will be supported by natural winter forage;
- Adverse impacts on other resources such as fisheries, riparian habitats, water quality, native plant communities, and other animal populations will be avoided or mitigated.

The BCWMA Management Plan directs the Department to pursue opportunities to enhance these resources when compatible with elk and deer management. This Project would meet these standards by maintaining and enhancing forested forage at the base of Ovando Mountain to address a habitat limitation in periods of harsh winter weather for migratory populations of 500 elk and 200 mule deer. This proposed project would maintain and enhance woody browse understories

and aspen stands that historically provided winter forage for mule deer and elk on lower Ovando Mountain but have been severely degraded by conifer encroachment and fire suppression over the last 90 years.

87-1-201(9) (iv) and 87-1-621 MCA

FWP is required to implement programs that address fire mitigation, pine beetle infestation, and wildlife habitat enhancement giving priority to forested lands in excess of 50 contiguous acres in any state park, fishing access site, or wildlife management area under the department's jurisdiction. FWP, in conjunction with the University of Montana, completed the *Forest Habitat Improvement Plan for the Ovando Mountain Unit of the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area* in 2009 (C. Paulu, on file at FWP, Region 2). The stand treatments proposed and described in this Environmental Assessment were specifically identified in the *Habitat Improvement Plan* as habitat improvement priorities following extensive field work, literature review, and community involvement. The Montana Legislature has provided FWP the means to accrue revenue from forest management activities and spend them to fund further management projects on its forested lands.

23-1-126 MCA, The Good Neighbor Policy of Public Land Use

As applied to public recreational land, The Good Neighbor Policy seeks to limit impacts to adjoining private and public land from noxious weeds, trespass, litter, noise and light pollution, streambank erosion, and loss of privacy.

The Montana Statewide Elk Management Plan (2005)

The Montana Statewide Elk Plan directs FWP to improve elk habitat through projects designed to improve vegetative diversity and to maintain or increase carrying capacity on winter range. This proposed project would work toward meeting this goal by restoring aspen stands, removing shade tolerant conifers encroaching on historically open and fire adapted ponderosa pine and larch stands, increasing recruitment of grass and woody browse understories in treated stands, removing late seral and diseased lodgepole pine, and reducing the probability of intense stand replacement fire events on the WMA.

**3. Name of project:** BCWMA Ovando Mountain Forest Habitat Restoration Project

**4. Anticipated Schedule:**

Estimated Commencement Date: 8/20/2010

Estimated Completion Date: 12/31/2011

Current Status of Project Design (% complete): 100%

**5. Location affected by proposed action (county, range and township):**

Powell County

Township 15 North

Range 11 West

Section 9, 10

Project is located within the Ovando Mountain Unit of the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area (See Figures 1 – 3).

Figure 1. The Ovando Mountain Unit of the BCWMA located in Montana's Blackfoot River watershed.

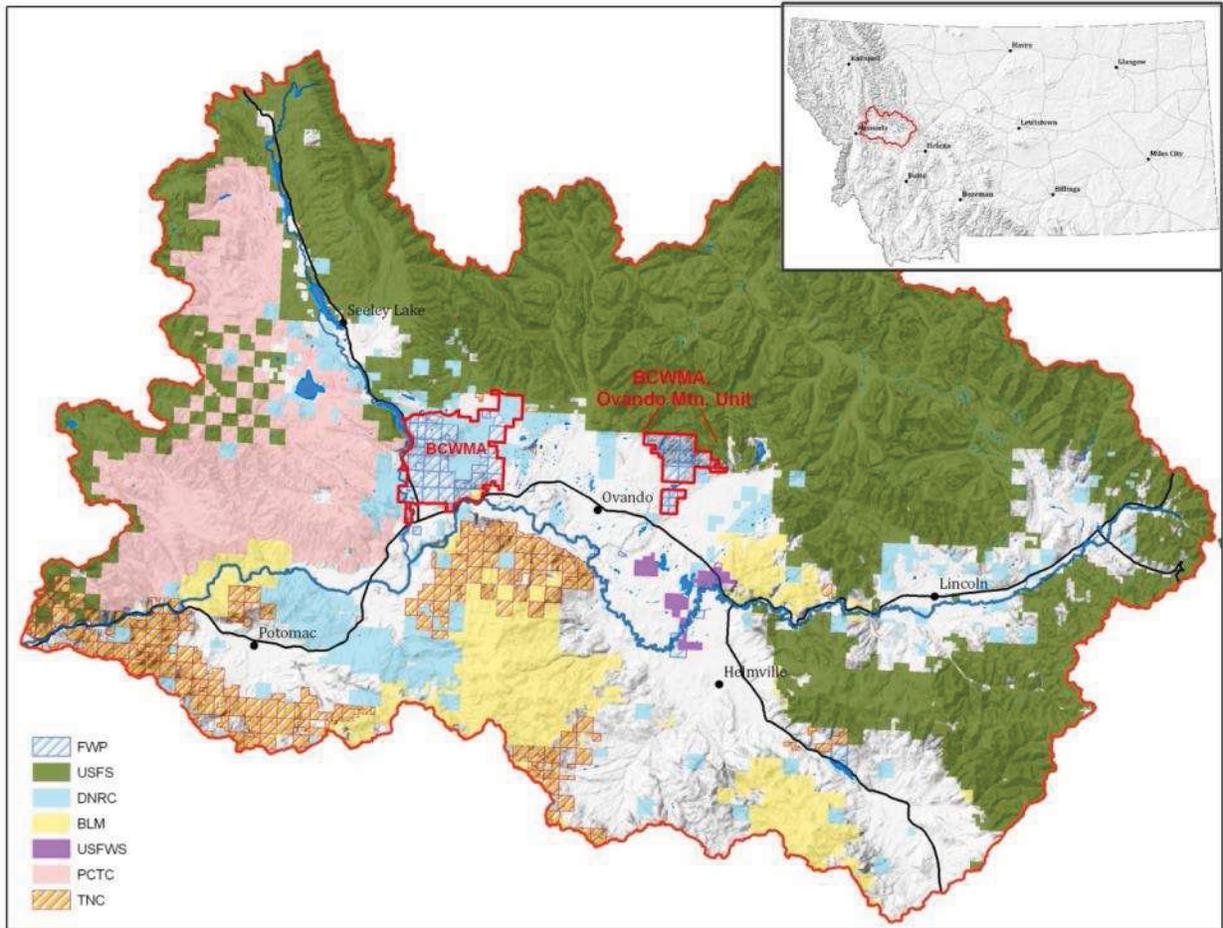


Figure 2. The Ovando Mountain Unit of the BCWMA and the timbered stands proposed for habitat restoration treatments.

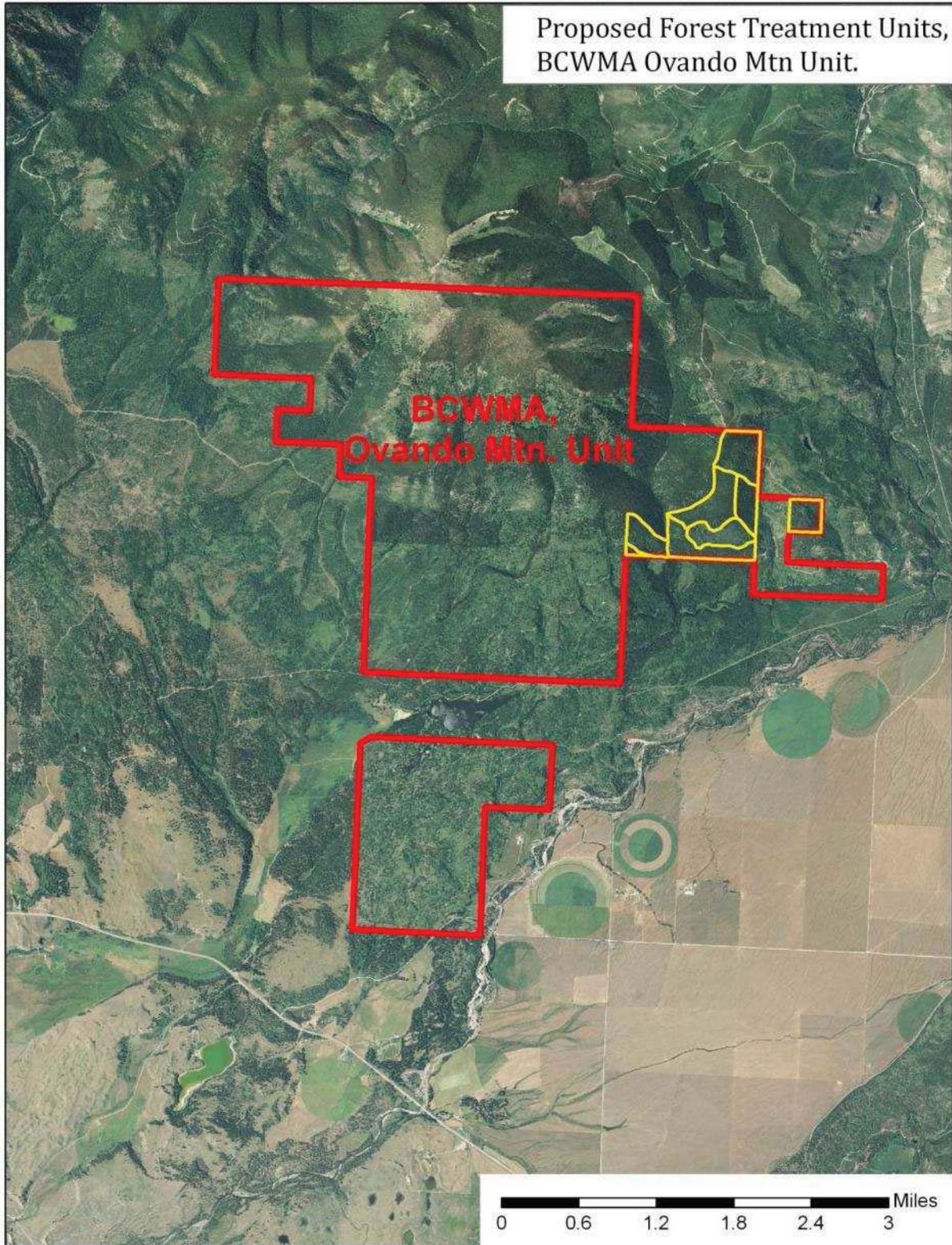
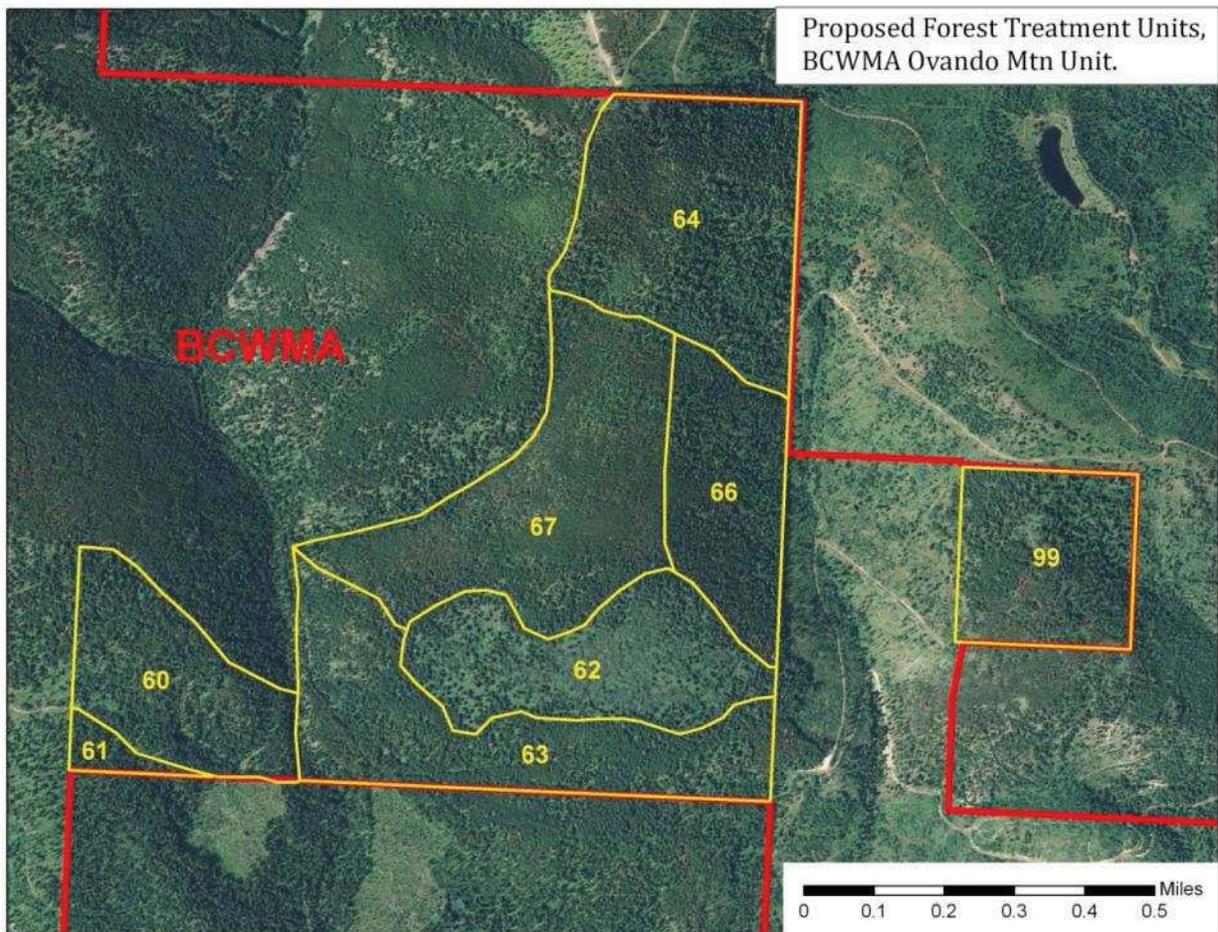


Figure 3. Forested stands proposed for treatment as part of the Ovando Mountain Forest Habitat Restoration Project. Stand numbers correspond to treatment descriptions in text.



**6. Project size -- estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:**

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	<u>0</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
(existing shop area)		Irrigated cropland	<u>0</u>
(b) Open Space/ Woodlands/Recreation	<u>354</u>	Dry cropland	<u>0</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian Areas	<u>0</u>	Forestry	<u>0</u>
		Rangeland	<u>0</u>
		Other	<u>0</u>

**8. Listing of any other Local, State or Federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction.**

(a) Permits:

Agency Name \_\_\_\_\_ Permits - None required \_\_\_\_\_

**(b) Funding:**

Agency Name \_\_\_\_\_ Montana FWP

Funding Amount \_\_\_\_\_ Costs to FWP for these forest habitat restoration treatments are expected to be covered by the sale of merchantable timber byproduct. Pyramid Mountain Lumber was awarded the contract (FWP RFP #100799) to conduct the restoration treatments. Any revenue in excess of project costs will be deposited into the legislatively-established FWP Forest Management Account to implement further forest management projects pursuant to the provisions of 87-1-201(9)(a)(iv).

**(c) Other Overlapping or Additional Jurisdictional Responsibilities:**

MT DNRC _____	Fire Protection
Powell County Weed District _____	Noxious Weed Control

**9. Narrative summary of the proposed action or project including the benefits and purpose of the proposed action:**

The Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA is located in the Blackfoot Valley of west-central Montana, along both sides of the Missoula-Powell County line, with most of the property lying along the north side of Highway 200 between Blanchard Creek and the North Fork of the Blackfoot River (Figure 1). The nearest communities are Greenough, Seeley Lake, and Ovando. The wood products, ranching and recreation/tourism industries support the local economy. Missoula is the nearest major population center, located about 45 miles west of the BCWMA.

Ovando Mountain, at 7,799-feet in elevation, is the main topographic feature of the Ovando Mountain Unit of the BCWMA. The Unit is comprised of two distinct parcels; approximately 5,500 acres on the south facing slopes of Ovando and Elk Mountains and an additional 1,100 acres on the valley floor south of Doney Reservoir (Figures 1, 2).

A migratory elk herd seasonally uses core habitats within the Ovando Mountain Unit of the BCWMA for winter range. FWP studies of radio-equipped elk have documented a yearlong home range of about 120,000 acres for this BCWMA elk herd, with habitually occupied summer ranges extending from lower Monture Creek and the lower North Fork of the Blackfoot River near Ovando to Canyon Creek and Dwight Creek in the Scapegoat Wilderness. Thus, changes in elk habitat on the BCWMA may directly affect opportunities for the public to hunt and view elk across a much larger area including portions of the Lolo National Forest and accessible state and private lands. The Unit forms the core of one of the most heavily-used Block Management Areas in FWP's Region 2 and supports tens of thousands of hunter days annually.

Portions of the BCWMA also provide important winter range for migratory and resident populations of mule deer and white-tailed deer. Moose, black bear, mountain lion, wolves, mountain grouse, and furbearing species are common on the property. Subject lands provide habitat for the recovering grizzly bear population and FWP has documented grizzlies denning near the peak of Ovando Mountain. Nearly 200 wildlife species were documented on the BCWMA in the 1990s (checklist is available from the FWP's Region 2 headquarters).

FWP acquired the majority of the Ovando Mountain Unit of the BCWMA, including the subject parcels, through a series of purchases and land exchanges occurring between 1957 and 1965. An additional 2,600-acre parcel was added to the Unit in 2009. The stands subject to this proposal lie on the eastern edge of the WMA at the base of Elk Mountain and are adjacent to private, USFS, and DNRC lands (Figures 1 – 3).

The subject stands were historically comprised of a complex of shrub, grass and shade intolerant and conifer-dominated plant communities that were maintained by a high frequency, low intensity fire regime. The last known large fire event occurred in 1919; wild fire has been actively suppressed since that time. A comparison of 1939 and 2009 aerial photos, as well as the results of FWP's 50-year direct monitoring of established vegetation plots on the WMA, indicates that the plant communities have shifted dramatically since fire suppression began 90 years ago. Historically, grassland and/shrubland communities dominated the property; only limited areas at the lower elevations were historically comprised of relatively dense conifer forest.

Today, (<70 year old) Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine dominate the understories of historically park-like ponderosa pine and larch stands; shade tolerant conifers have encroached on shrub fields and aspen stands within the Project area. Fire scars on large remnant old-growth ponderosa pine and larch trees indicate that, in the past, frequent low intensity fire periodically cleared out this conifer understory. Recently, shade tolerant conifer understories have developed and degraded the stands' value as ungulate winter range and now make the remnant old growth ponderosa pine and larch vulnerable to intense stand replacement crown fires. Such an intense wildfire would likely damage the stands' thin organic soils, and retard shrub, aspen, and grassland recovery. High intensity crown fire would also threaten the large and older age class larch and ponderosa pine as shade tolerant understory trees are now large enough to serve as ladder fuels carrying ground fires to the crowns of large remnant trees.

Several of the subject stands are dominated by late seral even age lodgepole pine. Both USFS Forest Insect and Disease (2006 - 2009) surveys and 2008 stand inspections indicate that these stands are heavily infested with mountain pine beetle and other forest pathogens and are experiencing extensive mortality. These heavily stocked stands of dead and dying trees further increase the risk of intense stand replacement fire on the WMA.

A variety of palatable shrub spp. (including native bittercherry, pin cherry, mountain ash, chokecherry, Rocky Mountain maple, snowbrush ceanothus (buckbrush), serviceberry, snowberry, and other browse species) still occur on or adjacent to subject stands and are expected to be recruited following treatment. Idaho fescue, rough fescue, and bluebunch wheatgrass are the dominant grass species and still occur where adequate sunlight penetrates the conifer over and mid stories. One of the subject stands is a 60-acre clonal aspen gallery heavily used by wintering ungulates and cavity nesting birds. This stand and smaller aspen groves elsewhere on the project area are declining due to conifer encroachment over the last 90 years.

In his study of browse condition trend on the Ovando Mountain Unit (Browse Condition and Trend on Montana Ungulate Ranges, Montana State University, 2002), S. K. Thompson found that forest succession has significantly decreased the extent and productivity of browse species within the Ovando Mountain Unit over the last 60 years. He noted that while the area had historically been a very productive elk and mule deer winter range, in more recent years it functions as only moderate winter range for elk, mule deer, and white-tailed deer.

FWP proposes to mechanically thin the shade-tolerant understory species (primarily Douglas fir and lodgepole pine) from below while favoring retention of larch, ponderosa pine, older age class Douglas fir. Patches of younger trees and snags will be retained within thinning units to provide cover for wildlife and to more closely mimic vegetative mosaics typical of stands maintained by high frequency, low intensity fire regimes. In some stands, slash would be left on site but pulled away from the boles of retained trees to allow for the introduction of prescribed fire in the future. Any future prescribed fire treatments would be subject to additional public scoping and review. In other stands, slash will be piled and burned on site when conditions permit.

Access to the treatment units is along the Ovando Haul Road and through existing USFS roads to the east of the subject parcels; all necessary access agreements are in place. This project would be coordinated with treatments MT DNRC will conduct in the fall/winter of 2010/2011 in S16 immediately south of the subject parcel so as to limit the duration of disturbance to the area. Limited temporary roads would need to be constructed; all temporary roads would be obliterated and reseeded when work is completed. All roads leading to and from the Project area are currently closed to public wheeled motorized use year round; no increase in open road density would occur due to this project. Treatment would cease during the general big game season.

The proposed treatments were prescribed by the *Forest Habitat Improvement Plan for the Ovando Mountain Unit of the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area* (2009) which was developed by University-trained forestry professionals and which included formal public input as specific treatment prioritization criteria. Most resident adjacent landowners were interviewed as the Plan was being developed and their views, input, and opinions guided its development.

The Project area lies within the 41,000 acre Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA). The BCCA is a collaborative partnership of State and federal agencies, user groups, and local landowners whose 15-member Council meets monthly to guide collaborative management of the 41,000 acre area; FWP, DNRC, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Blackfoot Challenge signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) formalizing their commitment to collaboratively manage the BCCA consistent with the following mission:

*Develop a working landscape that balances ecological diversity with local economic sustainability for the future benefit of the Blackfoot Watershed Community. Management will entail activities that seek to conserve, enhance and maintain a balance of wildlife habitat, wetlands, water, grasslands and timber resources with traditional uses including hunting, recreation, agriculture, and forestry. These shared values for the land will be complimented through working cooperatively with the surrounding agency and private landowners.*

This Project has been presented to, discussed by, and has the support of the BCCA Council, agency partners, neighboring landowners and interested publics. FWP and University of Montana students and staff have given several public presentations about the Project and have conducted field tours for interested private parties and agency staff.

The proposed treatments are as follows (please refer to Figure 3):

**Unit 60** – 39 ac., 30 – 60% slopes.

Current condition – Mature ponderosa pine/Douglas-fir dominant, dense Douglas-fir (100 – 400 stems per ac.) 80 – 160 avg. BA (basal area) per ac.

Treatment – Thin to a BA of 20 – 50 favoring older age class Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine and larch. Riparian buffers maintained and extended.

**Unit 61** – 5 ac, 10 – 40% slopes.

Current condition – Primarily mature ponderosa pine/Douglas-fir overstory with lesser lodgepole/spruce/sub-alpine fir, dense Douglas-fir (100 – 400 stems per ac.) 80 – 160 avg. basal area per ac.

Treatment – Thin to a BA of 20 – 50 favoring older age class Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine and larch. Riparian buffers maintained and extended.

**Unit 62** – 40 ac., 30 – 60% slopes.

Current condition – Contiguous aspen with significant conifer encroachment.

Treatment – Hand slash and thin conifers <14” dbh within and adjacent to this stand. Non-commercial.

**Unit 63** – 61 ac., 30 – 60% slopes.

Current condition - Mature ponderosa pine/Douglas-fir dominant, dense Douglas-fir (100 – 400 stems per ac.) 80 – 160 avg. basal area per ac.

Treatment – Thin to a BA of 20 – 50 favoring older age class Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine and larch. Riparian buffers maintained and extended. 55 acres of Unit 63 with steeper slopes will be hand slashed to provide patchiness while leaving large diameter Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, and larch. Slash would be moved away from the boles of the leave trees to protect them if prescribed fire is introduced at some future time.

**Unit 64** – 72 ac., 20 – 60% slopes.

Current condition – Primarily mature Douglas-fir overstory with dense Douglas-fir understory. A recent wind event caused significant blowdown attracting Douglas-fir beetles. Some lodgepole/subalpine fir is present in the west and northeast portions of the unit. Stocking is at 100 – 300 trees per acre, 100 – 250 avg. basal area per acre.

Treatment – Reduce overstory BA to 100 retaining mature and recruitment trees in irregular patches. Reduce risk of further insect disease spread by removing a portion of the recent windthrow.

**Unit 66** – 39 ac., 30 – 60% slopes.

Current condition – Intermediate to mature Douglas-fir, larch, and lodgepole with lesser mature ponderosa pine. Heavy Douglas-fir and lodgepole understory at 80 – 160 basal area, 100 – 300 trees per acre.

Treatment – Thin to a BA of 20 – 50 favoring older age class Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine and larch. Riparian buffers maintained and extended.

**Unit 67** – 65 ac., 0 – 60% slopes.

Current condition – Lesser slopes dominated by lodgepole pine, much of it infested with mountain pine beetle. Steeper slopes are primarily intermediate to mature Douglas-fir with lesser ponderosa pine and larch. Stocked at 80 – 160 basal area, 100 – 300 trees per acre.

Treatment – Group selection harvest to simulate historic stand mosaic. Focus on salvage of diseased lodgepole stands.

**Unit 99** – 33 ac., 20 – 60% slopes.

Current condition – Dense lodgepole and mature Douglas-fir with lesser ponderosa pine and larch. Lodgepole stands are infested with mountain pine beetle. Stocked at 80 – 160 basal area, 100 – 300 trees per acre.

Treatment – Group selection harvest in Lodgepole; thin Douglas-fir to a BA of 20 – 50 favoring mature Douglas-fir, larch, and ponderosa pine.

Treatments will be 56% skyline and 44% tractor. Work would proceed as follows: Construct temporary access roads. Begin treatment of tractor portions of units 64 and 67; move to Units 60, 61, and 99. Skyline operations could also begin in 63 upon completion of temp roads. Remainder of skyline units 67, 66, 64, and 99 will be completed last. Hand treatment of sub-merchantable trees to begin once mechanical treatments are completed. Tractor work will primarily be conducted during winter to limit ground disturbance. Temp road obliteration to be completed late fall 2011; most slash will be burned on site. Seeding and weed treatment will be conducted as conditions permit.

Pyramid's certified professional foresters will sample mark areas to confirm basal area prescriptions and monitor contractor performance. FWP field biologists will work with Pyramid to identify desired group selection of lodgepole pine and to attain group selection and retention of desired leave trees.

Temporary roads will be constructed to Best Management Practice (BMP) standard and obliterated following treatments by removing the road prism, depositing debris on disturbed sites and grass seeding. Existing roads will be maintained at BMP standard to protect soil and water resources in compliance with Montana Voluntary BMPs. Weed treatments will occur during spring 2011 and 2012.

Pyramid Mountain Lumber holds a Master Hazard Reduction Agreement with DNRC for slash generated from harvest activities and is a cooperator in the Montana/Idaho Smoke Management Airshed Group. All contractors will be Accredited Logging Professionals with the Montana Logging Assn. Foresters will identify and appropriately mark Streamside Management Zones; no impacts to sensitive riparian areas are anticipated.

**10. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives (including the no action alternative) to the proposed action whenever alternatives are reasonably available and prudent to consider and a discussion of how the alternatives would be implemented:**

**Alternative A: No Action**

If FWP decides not to proceed with the proposed action, no stands on the Ovando Mountain Unit of the BCWMA would be treated this year. FWP expects that ungulate winter range condition would continue to decline and the risk of high-intensity catastrophic wild fire would continue to increase. Pyramid Mountain Lumber secured a DNRC Jumpstart II grant which would subsidize the cost of these proposed forest habitat treatments. Should FWP forego this project, that grant would revert back and the Department may incur significant costs if it were to implement these treatments later.

**Alternative B: Proposed Action**

Conduct forested habitat improvement treatments on approximately 354 acres of the Ovando Mountain Unit of the BCWMA as described in #9, above. Following this action, FWP anticipates that important ungulate winter range condition will improve due to increased grass and woody browse understory recruitment. Treatment will also reduce the risk of high-intensity, stand replacement fire events that would remove the remnant large overstory trees, damage thin organic soils, slow grass and woody browse recruitment, and pose a significant risk to neighboring landowners.

**PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST**

**1. Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.**

**A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. **Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		X				
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?			X			
c. **Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				
f. Other:						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Land Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):**

Short sections of temporary roads will need to be constructed to facilitate removal of timber and timber byproduct. These roads will be built to BMP specifications and completely obliterated and seeded following project completion. No impacts to riparian areas are anticipated and no sediment delivery to or siltation of perennial water bodies will occur.

\* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.  
 \*\* Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).  
 \*\*\* Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.  
 \*\*\*\* Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

2. <u>AIR</u>  Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. **Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)			X			
b. Creation of objectionable odors?			X			
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. ***For P-R/D-I projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a.)		X				
f. Other:						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Air Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):**

Much of the slash and residual byproduct generated during the course of the proposed treatments will be burned on-site. The contractor holds a Master Hazard Reduction Agreement with DNRC for slash generated from treatment activities and is a cooperator in the Montana/Idaho Smoke Management Airshed Group. The contractor will comply with Powell County open burning timing restrictions and comply with inter-agency slash treatment regulations.

- \* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.
- \*\* Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).
- \*\*\* Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.
- \*\*\*\* Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

3. <u>WATER</u>  Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. *Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?			X			
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		X				
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. ****For P-R/D-I, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		X				
m. ***For P-R/D-I, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		X				
n. Other:						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Water Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):**

Treating the subject stands may slightly alter the rate and volume of spring runoff and retained snowpack. Given the limited scale of the project and condition of adjacent stands, this effect is expected to be extremely minor.

\* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

\*\* Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

\*\*\* Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

\*\*\*\* Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

4. <u>VEGETATION</u> Will the proposed action result in?	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			X			
b. Alteration of a plant community?			X			
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?			X			
f. ****For P-R/D-I, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		X				
g. Other:						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Vegetation (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):**

The Project intent is to restore and diversify vegetation to benefit wildlife habitat condition and protect stands from high-intensity wildfire. Please see #9 above for a more detailed description of proposed treatments. Noxious weed spread will be mitigated by minimizing ground disturbance and treating affected areas or areas at risk with herbicide during the Spring of 2011 and 2012.

\* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

\*\* Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

\*\*\* Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

\*\*\*\* Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

** 5. <u>FISH/WILDLIFE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			X			
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?			X			
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?			X			
h. ****For P-R/D-I, will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)			X			
i. ***For P-R/D-I, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		X				
j. Other:						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Fish and Wildlife:**

Some wildlife will be temporarily displaced from the Project area while treatments are ongoing. Large and vagile species will likely move to secure, adjacent habitat. Most bird nesting activity will have completed by Project initiation and implementation (fall and winter treatments). Most species' young of the year are sufficiently mobile by late August to safely move away from treatment areas until work is complete.

Three federally Threatened and one federally Endangered species occur in the vicinity of the project area.

*Canada lynx* – Stands proposed for treatment are located on drier, south and west aspects with moderate to low winter snow depths. There are no records of lynx detections on or immediately adjacent to the project area. A FWP wildlife biologist with over 10 years experience conducting lynx research in the Blackfoot Valley surveyed the area during winter and verified that the project area lacks sufficient snowshoe hare density, snowpack, and proximity to core lynx habitat to support significant lynx use.

*Grizzly bear* – Grizzlies are commonly observed on and adjacent to the project area. They are most sensitive to disturbance during the spring post-emergence period; treatments would primarily take

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place during fall and winter. The Project area is already managed for extremely low open-road densities (there are no open roads on or adjacent to the Project area); there would be no net increase in open-road densities as a result of this project. Contractors will not reside on site and will comply with standing Food Storage Orders. Following stand treatments, FWP expects greater serviceberry, chokecherry, hawthorn, huckleberry and forb production; these are all important summer/fall bear forage species.

*Gray wolf* – Although the gray wolf is currently listed as Endangered within the Project area, wolf populations are fully recovered and increasing in Montana. The Ovando Mountain wolf pack has been resident for 3 years and has successfully denned on or near the WMA in recent years. The maintenance of low open-road densities will minimize risks of illegal take and the improvement of winter range following treatment will benefit elk and deer, the wolves' primary prey species.

*Bull trout* – Bull trout occur and spawn in the North Fork Blackfoot River and its tributaries. No bull trout streams will be affected by the proposed treatments and no significant increase in sediment delivery to bull trout streams is anticipated as a result.

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- \*\*\*\* Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

## B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?			X			
b. Exposure of people to serve or nuisance noise levels?			X			
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				
e. Other:						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Noise/Electrical Effects (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):**

Logging and trucking equipment will increase noise levels on the Project area while activities are ongoing. The Project area is very remote; the nearest occupied residence is 1 mile away. Merchantable timber byproducts will be transported out the Ovando Haul Road or on the USFS logging road system. Both road systems were designed for heavy truck traffic and periodically have experienced higher levels of truck traffic during the last 40+ years.

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- \*\* Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).
- \*\*\* Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.
- \*\*\*\* Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

7. <b>LAND USE</b>  Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?		X				
b. Conflicted with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				
e. Other:						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Land Use (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):**

The proposed Project implements the BCWMA's Management Plan. The Project Area lies in a matrix of State, federal, and private ownerships that also actively manage their forested lands.

\* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

\*\* Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

\*\*\* Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

\*\*\*\* Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u>  Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?		X				
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?			X			
d. ***For P-R/D-I, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		X				
e. Other:						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Risk/Health Hazards (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):**

Timber management activities are inherently dangerous. Pyramid Mountain Lumber employs certified professional foresters and all contractors must be certified as Accredited Logging Professionals with the Montana Logging Association.

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\*\* Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

\*\*\* Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

\*\*\*\* Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

9. <u>COMMUNITY IMPACT</u>  Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?			X			
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?			X			
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?			X			
f. Other:						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Community Impact (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):**

An estimated 22 local jobs will be created or sustained by Project work while the Project is ongoing. The Project will also benefit the successful applicant, Pyramid Mountain Lumber in Seeley Lake. Pyramid is Seeley Lake's largest employer with 110 full time staff. Log hauling and contractor traffic will increase during the Project. Roads and other infrastructure that will be used by contractors were designed (and will be maintained) to support commercial logging and log transport activities.

\* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

\*\* Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

\*\*\* Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

\*\*\*\* Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u>  Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:		X				
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?			X			
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?			X			
e. **Define projected revenue sources						
f. **Define projected maintenance costs.						
g. Other:						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Public Services/Taxes/Utilities (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):**

The Project will increase state and local tax revenues from the sale of fuel and equipment and from employees' income. Fuel and electricity will be required to treat stands and process the timber byproduct.

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\*\* Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

\*\*\* Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

\*\*\*\* Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

<b>** 11. AESTHETICS/RECREATION</b>  <b>Will the proposed action result in:</b>	<b>IMPACT *</b>					
	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Minor</b>	<b>Potentially Significant</b>	<b>Can Impact Be Mitigated</b>	<b>Comment Index</b>
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?			X			
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				
c. **Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report.)		X				
d. ***For P-R/D-I, will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		X				
e. Other:						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Aesthetics/Recreation (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):**

Some treated stands may be visible from nearby public roads. The Project's intent is to restore stands to more closely approximate historic conditions. Temporary roads will be obliterated and re-seeded. The risk of catastrophic wildfire, which would also modify the scenic vista, will be reduced.

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12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u>  Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. **Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. **** <u>For P-R/D-I</u> , will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)						
e. Other:						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Cultural/Historical Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):**

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## SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

<b>13. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE</b>  <b>Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:</b>	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. ***For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		X				
g. ****For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.						

**Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Significance Criteria (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):**

This project would improve ungulate habitat conditions and reduce the risk of high-intensity wildfire on and adjacent to the BCWMA. The proposed treatments were prescribed by the *Forest Habitat Improvement Plan for the Ovando Mountain Unit of the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area* (2009) which was developed by University-trained forestry professionals and which solicited formal public input as specific treatment prioritization criteria. Most resident neighbors were interviewed as the *Plan* was being developed and their input guided its development.

The Project area lies within the 41,000 acre Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA). The BCCA is a collaborative partnership of State and federal agencies, user groups, and local landowners whose 15-member Council meets monthly to help collaboratively manage the 41,000 acre area. Its mission is to:

*Develop a working landscape that balances ecological diversity with local economic sustainability for the future benefit of the Blackfoot Watershed Community. Management will entail activities that seek to conserve, enhance and maintain a balance of wildlife habitat, wetlands, water, grasslands and timber resources with traditional uses including hunting, recreation, agriculture, and forestry. These shared values for the land will be complimented through working cooperatively with the surrounding agency and private landowners.*

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- \*\* Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).
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This Project has been presented to, discussed by, and has the support of the BCCA Council, agency partners, neighboring landowners and interested publics. FWP and U of M have given several public presentations on the Project and have conducted field tours for interested private parties and agency staff.

- \* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.
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- \*\*\*\* Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

### **PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT**

The BCWMA Ovando Mountain Forest Habitat Restoration Project would begin to implement the intent of the BCWMA Management Plan, the FWP Good Neighbor Policy, *The Forest Habitat Improvement Plan for the Ovando Mountain Unit of the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area*, and FWP land management statute. Specifically, it would improve elk and deer winter range on the BCWMA, restore fire-adapted stands closer to historic condition, and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire on Project lands. The Project has been extensively vetted by and has the support of the BCCA Council and neighboring landowners. *The Forest Habitat Improvement Plan* from which prescriptions were derived explicitly incorporated local input into Project design and prioritization.

### **PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

- 1. Describe the level of public involvement for this project if any, and, given the complexity and the seriousness of the environmental issues associated with the proposed action, is the level of public involvement appropriate under the circumstances?**

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- One legal notice in each of these newspapers:  
*The Seeley Swan Pathfinder*  
*The Silver State Post*
- This EA may be obtained by mail from Region 2 FWP, 3201 Spurgin Rd., Missoula 59804; by phoning 406-542-5500; by emailing [fwprg22@mt.gov](mailto:fwprg22@mt.gov); or by viewing FWP's Internet website <http://fwp.mt.gov> ("Recent Public Notices").

Comments should be directed by: mail to Jay Kolbe, FWP, PO Box 1228, Seeley Lake, MT 59868; phone to 406-677-0162; or email to [jkolbe@mt.gov](mailto:jkolbe@mt.gov). Comments must be received by FWP no later than 5:00 p.m. on September 2, 2010.

Copies of this environmental assessment will be distributed to the neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

### **PART V. EA PREPARATION**

- 1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? (YES/NO)? If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.**

No. Based upon the above assessment which has identified a limited number of minor impacts to the physical and human environment that will be either for a short duration or that the affects of the propose project can be mitigated below the level of significance, an

EIS is not required and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of review.

**2. Name, title, address and phone number of the person(s) responsible for preparing the EA:**

Jay Kolbe  
Wildlife Biologist  
FWP, Region Two  
PO Box 1288, Seeley Lake, MT 59868  
(406) 677-0162

**3. List of entities consulted during preparation of the EA:**

MT DNRC  
U. S. Forest Service  
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
BCCA Council  
U of M School of Forestry  
The Blackfoot Challenge