

**Decision Notice
and
Finding of No Significant Impact
for
West Shore State Park Timber Thinning Project
Environmental Assessment**

**Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 1
490 N. Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901**

February 14, 2007

Description of Proposed Action

The purpose of this action is to complete a forest-thinning project at West Shore State Park. The objective is to maintain the property over time for safe public use, with a forest cover that is healthy and insect, disease, and fire resistant. In consideration of fire behavior, tree crowns that are not touching will reduce the risk of stand replacement fire. A healthy stand, with a mixture of tree species native to the site with a diversity of tree sizes and ages, is the desired future condition. The long-term goal is to restore the site to the historic stand structure of large, open, park-like stands dominated by ponderosa pine and western larch, with some Douglas fir. The specific objectives of this project will be:

1. To remove hazardous, diseased, and dead or dying trees.
2. To open the under-story to promote the health of ponderosa pine.
3. To reduce stress on trees due to competition for light, water, and nutrients. That stress is resulting in increasing mortality due to the combined effects of dwarf mistletoe, root rot, and bark beetles.
4. To reduce fuel loads, ladder fuels, and the possibility of stand replacement fire in order to protect the park and adjacent private lands.

Existing Condition

West Shore State Park is nearly entirely forested, with areas of dense growth. Existing stands are characterized by a lack of disturbance that spans seven decades. The steep east-, south-, and west-facing slopes in the center of the park have open, moderately spaced Douglas fir that are growing well and have little evidence of insect or diseases. However, the gentle slopes and benches toward the outer portions of the property have very dense stands of 70-year-old Douglas fir and western larch. There has been considerable mortality in the overcrowded fir and in the scattered lodgepole pine on the

west and south boundaries. Competition for site resources from overcrowded conditions is stressing the surviving trees, causing them to be more vulnerable to root rot and bark beetle attack. Heavy ground fuel build-up is also apparent in the denser stand areas. This has resulted in an increase in the risk of stand replacement fire. The area is highly susceptible to a crown fire with a likely spillover to adjacent properties.

Alternatives

For this project, FWP hired a professional forester to write a timber prescription to address identified concerns with forest health and wildfire risk. This prescription identified three areas for possible treatment totaling approximately 60 acres. Units 1 and 2 have similar forest health and fire risk issues that are addressed by area-wide thinning to prescribed density levels as described in the EA. Unit 3 designates removal of hazardous trees in campgrounds and along roadsides, and those that present a risk to developed facilities. These trees will be selectively identified for removal as opposed to the area-wide thinning approach that will occur in Units 1 and 2.

The following is a brief description of the three alternatives that were developed in the EA:

Alternative A: No action.

Action: FWP will not do forest management at West Shore and will let the natural progression take place.

Impacts: Dense stands of predominantly Douglas fir will be less vigorous and continue to be more susceptible to fir beetle, dwarf mistletoe, and root rot. Competition for nutrients and moisture will result in many trees dying out. Dead and dying trees will add fuel loads in the park, increasing the likelihood of stand replacement fire. Deadfall and ladder fuels will increase the possibility of a crown fire, which could threaten adjacent properties.

Because beetle-infested trees will not be removed, beetles will continue to disperse from currently impacted trees, causing adjacent stressed trees to be attacked, with potential spillover to trees on adjacent lands. Dead and dying trees could become hazardous to recreational users near developed areas. The long-term aesthetics of the park will be impacted. As ponderosa pine are smothered due to lack of light, there will be virtually no seedling regeneration, leaving Douglas fir the dominant species. Since the forest cover will remain dense, little new tree growth of any kind will be generated in the understory. This will lead to a homogenous forest of one age class, which reduces diversity and is more at risk to stand replacement events.

Alternative B: Complete Unit One and remove identified hazardous and diseased trees only.

Action: This alternative will address the major concerns at the park by treatment of approximately 50 acres of the dense, small-diameter trees along Highway 93 and

property boundaries to the south and north. It will provide conditions for more vigorous growth of remaining trees and reduce fuel loads. This alternative will remove dead and dying trees from the park, leaving the remaining trees more resistant to insect and disease infestation. Some snags will be left for wildlife habitat. Efforts will be made to provide a buffer between the highway and the park interior through a feathering approach that leaves the boundaries of the park denser to help mitigate highway noise and visual clutter.

The drawback to this alternative is that it will not address the dense Douglas fir stand (Unit 2) between the upper road campground and Flathead Lake. If a fire should start down-slope of this area, the steep terrain will be conducive to the spread of the fire through the campground, thereby placing visitors and their property at risk. Additionally, regarding species diversity, because space will not be opened up around the few ponderosa pine in other areas of the park, regeneration of this species will not be achieved elsewhere. A continuation of the dominant single-age-class monoculture of fir will continue in these locations. Finally, if this alternative were selected, there will be virtually no view of the lake from the campground. This is an attribute that is highly desirable in this type of recreational setting.

Alternative C – Selected Alternative: Complete the prescription in Units 1, 2, and 3 as recommended.

Action: In addition to the impacts of thinning Unit 1, this alternative will also address treatment of Unit 2, below the upper road camping area. It will also allow for removal of hazardous and selected trees in the A-loop campground to reduce fuel loads and allow for more vigorous tree growth. Additionally, it will allow for removal of a few trees for vista maintenance at the park's designated photo viewpoint and for removal of selected hazardous trees or those whose roots may affect road surfacing or facility integrity. This alternative will address the Unit 2 concerns of tree density and fuel loads and the heightened risk of a fire spreading rapidly up the slope and through the campground area. It will also allow for a limited view of the lake from the upper road.

The remaining trees will be more resistant to fir beetle, dwarf mistletoe, and root rot. Over time the forest cover will become more vital, and fire and wind resistant. A mixture of tree species, sizes, and ages will be achieved. Over an extended period of time the site will be restored to a large, open, and more historic stand dominated by ponderosa pine, with a mix of western larch and some Douglas fir. Because crown density and fuel loads will be reduced, the risk of stand replacement fire will be lowered. Ponderosa pine, which is highly resistant to ground fires, will not be negatively affected, and risk to adjacent private lands will be lowered. This alternative will open up space around remaining ponderosa pine, allowing for more vitality and regeneration. The diversity and age class structure will be enhanced, with a mixture of tree species, sizes, and ages to provide replacement trees as some large trees die off over time.

For all units, treatment will be implemented through a commercial thinning timber sale, specifying mechanical harvesters, and logs and slash transported to designated loading

or disposal areas. The commercial thinning will take place in the winter when the ground is frozen to decrease ground and vegetative disturbance. Native grass seeds will be sown in all areas of ground disturbance. Stumps will be cut to 4 inches or less. The commercial value of the excess trees on the site should cover the cost of completely disposing of the slash resulting from the harvested trees as well as the natural accumulation of excess ground fuels. Old growth and other desirable leave trees will be marked with orange ribbons by a professional forester to prevent felling.

Precautions will be taken to close roads during the project to prevent vehicles from entering. Signs will be prominently displayed, informing visitors of the project and hazardous conditions. Areas will be closed to public access while work is being performed and machinery is operated or if conditions are deemed unsafe.

Public Comment

The environmental assessment was published in local newspapers and posted on the FWP web site. Public comments were accepted for 30 days, from January 8 through 5:00 p.m., February 7, 2007. Three on-site walking tours of marked treatment sample areas were conducted January 16, 23, and 27. A total of 12 individuals took part.

Three written comments were received. Two were generally in favor of the project as described in the EA, and the third was a request from a seasonal resident who owns property near the park expressing the desire for FWP to conduct the project in June.

In response to the above request, FWP intends to conduct the project during the winter months for the following reasons: a) During the winter the forest floor has snow coverage, and will possibly be frozen, thus reducing impacts from equipment; and b) park visitation is at its lowest in the winter, thus making the project much safer.

Other concerns mentioned: 1) Additional objective being added to include visual quality; 2) not burning slash on-site, but rather favoring grinding and removal; 3) more aggressive action toward weed control; 4) maintaining the proper number of wildlife snag trees; and 5) use of seed which reflects native plant species currently existing on-site.

Responses to concerns: 1) Visual quality is addressed in EA in Section 11, with noted mitigation measures; 2) grinding/chipping and removal from site is the preferred method to deal with slash, but burning will not be totally excluded and impacts can be mitigated; 3) noxious weeds are addressed in EA on page 8, Section 1, "The area is managed under Region One's noxious weed management program, and any occurrence of noxious weeds will be treated chemically, biologically, or mechanically under that program;" 4) sufficient snag trees as determined by FWP will be marked and left; and 5) although individual species are not listed, the use of native species as mentioned in the EA implies those that currently or previously existed on-site. FWP will specify as part of any contract what seed will be used.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Based on analysis in the EA, I find Alternative C to be the selected alternative. I have evaluated the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies, and have determined that this action will not have a significant impact on the human or physical environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

In accordance with FWP policy, an appeal may be made by any person who has either commented in writing to the department on the proposed project, or who has registered or commented orally at a public meeting held by the department on the proposed project, or who can provide new evidence that will otherwise change the proposed plan. An appeal must be submitted to the Director of FWP in writing and must be postmarked or received within 30 days of this decision notice. The appeal must describe the basis for the appeal, how the appellant has previously commented to the department or participated in the decision-making process, and how the department can provide relief. The appeal should be mailed to: Director, Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 1420 East 6th Avenue, Helena, MT 59620.

James R. Satterfield, Jr., Ph.D.
Regional Supervisor

Date